

#198: JULY 15–AUGUST 11, 2014 A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE

THE INDYPENDENT



BACK TO IRAQ?

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WE DESERVE BEAUTY, p17

ROB LAQUINTA



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the reader's voice



WFP SOLD US OUT

While the Tea Party defeats the conservative House Majority Leader from Virginia, Dan Cantor — the apparent czar for life of the WFP — endorses Cuomo again and gets a big pile of nothing in return (“The Real Reason WFP Cut a Deal with Cuomo,” June *Indypendent*).

WFP doesn’t hold Democrats accountable — it holds working families in check, no matter what the Dems do. Everybody knows it. It’s straight up corruption. In fact, not one single time has WFP done ANYTHING but tell workers and the left to sign on to another round of shit-eating from the Democratic Party table.

We aren’t buying it.

— REALITY CZECH
from indypendent.org

These suckers still think the WFP

gives a hoot about them. It’s a corrupt enterprise where the boss class of a handful of unions (and brokerage schemes like ACORN) stand in for the politics we need.

Democratic Party corruption is nothing new. When a non-corrupt governor Eliot Spitzer, was elected — they made sure to get him right quick. He would have prosecuted Wall Street, so he had to go.

Now their errand boy Andy Jr. comes in, promises to destroy our pensions and the WFP “plays ball” and strikes out yet again.

Can we just stop pretending that WFP has anything to do with “progressivism” — whatever that word is supposed to mean in any case?

The rich run this town, and the liberals run PR for them.

— ROY HARDING
from indypendent.org

‘I WILL NOT BE BLAMED’

Elliot Rodger killed twice as many men as he did women but you frame it as misogyny. You blame men for things they aren’t responsible for (“Now All Men,” June *Indypendent*). I will not be blamed for all the murders, car thefts, drug sales and arsons that take place every day so I refuse to be blamed for the catcalls that take place as well. Even in your own example you did nothing but stare on that train platform, so fuck you Mr. Internet White Knight.

— ZODACK
from indypendent.org

FORCED CONFORMITY

Why are people who write about things like the Isla Vista shooting so comfortable with forcing social change and conformity on others (“Now All Men,” June *Indypendent*)? Why are they so comfortable with simply “educating” people out of their biases? And why does the word “objectifying” get used to describe everything from impure thoughts to women feeling that they’re unhappy with their weight? Can’t we admit to ourselves that “objectification” is less a determinant psychological category and more a moral boogeyman for progressive types to worship? You don’t have to feel like this society is oppressing you, you have the choice to culture yourself to view these things as the utmost of social disunity, carefully conforming to the experiences of the collective as a guidepost for personal achievement — or you can do better.

— ANONYMOUS
from indypendent.org

DIVISIVE OR LIBERATING?

Violence against anyone is to be condemned, and Elliot Rodger’s “manifesto” targeted humanity more than just women. The first phase of his “Day of Retribution” targeted men and he killed twice as many men as women (“Now All Men,” June *Indypendent*).

But the exploitation of tragedy to advance a one-eyed agenda, which aims to protect half the population by demonizing the

other half, could hardly be more counterproductive.

Even more counterproductive is the false dogma that women’s objectification and flaunting of their bodies and sexuality plays no part in the problem, that women are purely victims and men wholly victimizers.

This is not only counter-factual, but disempowers women by pretending that their own choices and actions have no effect in the world.

— ROBERT RIVERSONG
from indypendent.org

Robert, he’s not demonizing half the population; he’s demonizing a distorted view of masculinity — which victimizes men, as well as women, robbing us all of our authenticity, our full humanity.

Extremely powerful writing, as always. You are aptly named, Nick Powers.

— LESLEE
from indypendent.org

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PARKING LOT THEATER: Members of the Drilling Company perform Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in a Lower East Side municipal parking lot. For more, see page 18.

SUNDAYS THRU OCT
2pm–dusk • Free
PERFORMANCE: DRUMMER’S GROVE. The drummers’ circle has gathered in this corner of Prospect Park on Sunday afternoons for decades. Head to the park for powerful beats, energetic dancers and a celebratory atmosphere that is unique to Brooklyn. Anyone is invited to bring their drum or simply watch. Prospect Park
Parkside and Ocean Ave entrance
718-965-8951 • prospectpark.org

advance/\$20 door
POETRY: CALL ME CRAZY: DIARY OF A MAD SOCIAL WORKER. Written and performed by Helena D. Lewis, *Call Me Crazy* is a poetry collection based on the author’s nervous breakdown and subsequent psychiatric care. After being restrained, Lewis recalls stories of her own life, including interactions with prostitutes, drug addicts, prisoners and more. Nuyorican Poets Café
236 E 3rd St

Corner of Ludlow and Broome Sts
212-873-9050 • shakespeareinthepark-inglot.com

FRI JULY 18
7pm • Free
CONCERT: BEBEL GILBERTO AND VINICIUS CANTUÁRIA. Celebrate Brooklyn! summer festival, presented by BRIC, presents internationally acclaimed Brazilian bossa nova icons, Vinicius Cantuária and Bebel Gilberto. The show will begin with contemporary African folk from Zimbabwean singer Netsayi. Prospect Park Bandshell
9th St/Prospect Park West entrance
718-683-5600 • prospectpark.org

SUNDAYS JULY 20–AUG 17
6–9pm • \$65
NATURE: HARBOR HERON SUNSET ECO-CRUISE. Get on this cruise to see some of the 3,000 herons that fly South to nest on New York Harbor’s small islands this summer. Not only will you see these birds, but you will also cruise past renowned monuments, skyline views and city bridges. Three different routes are available — East River, New York Harbor and Jamaica Bay. South Street Seaport
Pier 16
212-742-1969 • nywatertaxi.com/tours/audobon

TUES JULY 22
7:30pm • \$12 advance/\$15 door
THEATER: QUEER HISTORIES. Dixon Place presents a three-part theatrical investigation of queer history and trauma, “At Risk,” “Yarn and You” and “All Your Doctors.” Darkly comedic and intense, the three presentations use poetry, dance and, yes, PowerPoint. Dixon Place
161A Chrystie St
212-219-0736 • dixonplace.org

THUR JULY 24
6:30pm • Free

PHOTO LECTURE: FROM ABOVE AND BEYOND. Self-taught Brooklyn-based photographer Navid Baraty, whose work consists of striking images that range from the skyscrapers and intersections of New York City to the Alaskan frontier, India and beyond, highlights his global journeys and the stories behind his remarkable photos. Mid-Manhattan Library
455 Fifth Ave
212-340-0863 • nypl.org

SAT JULY 26
8pm • \$10 suggested
OPEN MIC: FEM TOGETHER. Wow Café will be hosting an open mic for poetry, spoken word, song and music. Anybody who identifies in some part as femme, female, feminine, etc. is invited to share whatever they please. Coffee and tea will be served. If you are interested in performing, shoot justinerenson@gmail.com an e-mail. Wow Café
59-61 E 4th St, 4th Fl
917-725-1482 • wowcafe.org

SAT JULY 26–SUN JULY 27
12–8pm
BOOK SALE: REVOLUTION BOOKS! Revolution Books strives to create an idea of a radically different world through literature — support the bookstore by buying some great books! 146 W 26th St
212-691-3345 • revolutionbooksnyc.org

SUN JULY 27
7pm–12am • Free
BOOK DISCUSSION: MAINSTREAMING TORTURE. Scholar and author of *Mainstreaming Torture: Ethical Approaches in the Post-9/11 United States* Rebecca Gordon will lead a discussion on torture and how we can confront and challenge it today. Bluestockings Bookstore & Café
172 Allen St
212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

THUR JULY 31
8pm • \$13
SCREENING: APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR. Rooftop Films presents *Appropriate Behavior*, directed by Desiree Akhavan, a film about a young bisexual Iranian-American living in Bushwick and her struggles as she is caught between different identities: modernity vs. tradition, straight vs. gay and hope vs. cynicism. There will be a musical performance at 8:30pm. Greenpoint High School for Engineering and Automotive Technology
50 Bedford Ave, Bklyn
718-417-7362 • rooftopfilms.com

FRIDAYS AUG 1–22
10am • \$25
SERIES: GENDER BENDERS. 92Y presents four films that explore the growing cultural acceptance of nontraditional gender identity: *In and Out*, *Normal*, *Liberal*, and *Victor/Victoria*. Discussions will follow. Lexington Ave at 92nd St
212-415-5500 • 92y.org

FRI AUG 1
6–8pm • Free
DISCUSSION: INTRODUCTION TO ANARCHISM. Join the Base for its biweekly discussion on anarchism, hosted every other Friday. Incorporating diverse and fundamental texts from anarchist thinkers, video screenings and lectures, the discussion will provide an understanding of anarchism and related social movements. The Base
1302 Myrtle Ave, Bklyn
thebasebk@gmail.com • thebasebk.org

SUN AUG 3
6–8pm • Free
WORKSHOP: OUTDOOR COMPOSTING. ‘Tis the season: attend this outdoor composting workshop and get the best composting tips and guidance from educators at the NYC Compost Project. Hudson River Park
Pier 46
hudsonriverpark.org

MON AUG 4
6pm • Free
VIGIL: NO SEPARATE JUSTICE! Brooklyn for Peace is co-sponsoring a campaign to end abuses of human rights and civil liberties in the “War on Terror” cases, the majority of which are against Muslims. This vigil will be held outside the Metropolitan Correctional Center and will focus on Yassin Arref. Alexis Agathocelous from the Center for Constitutional Rights will speak. 150 Park Row
718-624-5921 • brooklynpeace.org

SAT AUG 9–SUN AUG 10
1pm • \$35
FESTIVAL: LONG ISLAND BLUES. Hosted by the Long Island Blues Relief Fund, the goal of the 2014 Long Island Blues Festival is to raise money to benefit Long Islanders that are still suffering from the consequences of Hurricane Sandy. Come listen to great music by the likes of Zora Young while supporting a worthy cause. Cow Meadow Park & Preserve
Freeport, NY
631-393-6878 • freeportbluesandjazzfestival.com

EVERY MON, FRI & SUN
Mon & Fri 3–6pm, Sun 10am–12pm • Free
EXERCISE: ROLLER SKATE AT BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK. Spend the summer mornings and afternoons jamming out on roller skates at the park’s new rink. Pier 2, Bklyn
brooklynbridgepark.org

EVERY FRIDAY
12–5pm • Free • Weather dependent
PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE: BROOKLYN FREE STORE. Check out this free space where anything is possible and nothing is for sale. Anyone is welcome to participate by contributing or receiving goods, performances, art or services. Material items are just the beginning of it. Corner of Marcy and Lafayette Aves, Bklyn
freeNYC@gmail.com



HARD TO BEAT: Drummers gather to play at Drummer’s Grove in Prospect Park every Sunday. All are welcome.

WEEKENDS THRU OCT 14
WEEKDAYS THRU AUG
Weekdays 5–7pm, Sat & Sun 9am–6pm
• Free
SPORTS AND RECREATION: KAYAKING. Test your nautical athleticism and kayak on New York City’s waterways. Equipment is provided. Free kayaking is also available at Pier 96, 72nd St and Governors Island; see website for schedule. Pier 26
West St, north of N Moore St
downtownboathouse.org

THRU SAT JULY 26
Thurs–Sat • 4pm & 7pm • \$15

212-505-8183 • nuyorican.org
THRU SAT AUG 16
Thurs–Sat • 8pm • Free
THEATER: SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARKING LOT. The Drilling Company presents *Twelfth Night* (through July 26) and *Othello* (July 31–Aug 16) in a municipal parking lot in the Lower East Side. Come celebrate this neighborhood tradition’s 20th year, while it’s still here — the lot will soon be swallowed up by the Essex Crossing development project and this is Shakespeare’s last season there. Some seats will be provided; feel free to bring your own chair or a blanket! Municipal Parking Lot

Small Town, Big Fracking Victory

By JOHN TARLETON

When Deborah Cipolla-Dennis moved to Dryden, New York, she and her wife built a house on the 32 acres of land they had purchased. They looked forward to putting down roots in a small, tight-knit rural community that shares the tolerant values of the nearby college town of Ithaca where she works.

However, Cipolla-Dennis soon started receiving visits and phone calls from a representative of the Colorado-based Anschutz Exploration Corporation who urged her to lease her land. He said nothing of fracking — the controversial drilling technique that requires injecting millions of gallons of chemical-laced water and sand deep into the earth to tap hard-to-reach deposits — but Cipolla-Dennis was wary and shooed him away.

Dryden, population 14,000, sits atop the Marcellus Shale, a natural gas-rich geological formation that runs beneath southern and central New York. Anschutz persisted, finding some landholders who were willing to sign leases. By 2009, Cipolla-Dennis and others were alarmed by the oil and gas industry's interest in their town and began to organize.

"It was truly grassroots," Cipolla-Dennis recalled. "We were meeting in each other's living rooms."

Soon, the Dryden Resources Awareness Council (DRAC) was founded. Members began to gather petition signatures and pressure their town board to adopt a fracking ban. They pointed to the extra noise and heavy truck traffic that accompanies fracking as well as the air and water pollution it has brought to rural areas in other parts of the country, including neighboring Pennsylvania, which has seen a fracking boom in the past decade.

The Dryden town board approved a fracking ban in a unanimous bipartisan vote in 2011. The company quickly sued. In the culmination of a three-year legal battle, on June 30 New York State's highest court issued a

landmark ruling. It affirmed that under state law municipalities are allowed to use their zoning powers to bar fracking from taking place within their boundaries.

"It's over and it's amazing," Cipolla-Dennis said of the legal battle. "People are very surprised that we would buck the system and tell this company 'no, you can't come into our town and do this' and then win in court."

STATEWIDE BAN?

There are currently 170 municipalities in New York State that have bans or moratoriums on fracking. It's considered likely that more local governments will follow suit now that they do not have to worry about being sued.

Polls have consistently shown that New Yorkers are about evenly divided on the merits of fracking. In the face of a fierce opposition campaign, the last two governors, David Patterson and Andrew Cuomo, have maintained a temporary moratorium in place while new studies about fracking's health impacts are carried out.

Cipolla-Dennis said it's still crucial for the statewide moratorium on fracking to be made into a permanent ban. Fracking opponents who rallied July 8 outside a Midtown luncheon where Gov. Cuomo was slated to speak agreed.

"Air pollution and water pollution doesn't stop at municipal borders. It doesn't respect sort of artificial boundaries," said Alex Beauchamp of Food & Water Watch, an environmental advocacy group. "So ultimately, we really need Governor Cuomo to ban fracking, not just in some towns but in the entire state."

"I'm afraid that if Cuomo ended the moratorium, there's enough leases in place so that I think we would be doomed," added Eleanor Preiss of the Coalition Against the Rockaway Pipeline.

Cipolla-Dennis said activists in Dryden are in touch with their counterparts around

Continued on next page



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working for peace and justice in Brooklyn & beyond!

To be as effective as possible, to amplify our voice, to expand our programs & outreach, we need YOU to join us!

Check out brooklynpeace.org to find out how to get involved.

Upcoming Events

All events are free and everyone is welcome!

Vigil at Metropolitan Correctional Center

No Separate Justice Campaign

Monday, August 4 from 6 to 7 pm at 150 Park Row at Pearl in Manhattan

People's Climate March, Manhattan

Sunday, September 21

E-mail climateaction@brooklynpeace.org to participate in Brooklyn contingents

War No More

on **BCAT**

CORRECTION:

2nd Wednesday of every month at 10 pm

Tune in on 1998 (TimeWarner), 68 (Cablevision), 83 (RCN); 43 (Verizon).

Don't have cable access or you're not in Brooklyn? Watch the livestream at bricartsmedia.org or visit youtube.com/brooklynforpeace

Programs available on DVD & Youtube! Email bfp@brooklynpeace.org or visit youtube.com/brooklynforpeace

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BUILDING MOMENTUM: More than 400 people attended a public meeting of the People's Climate March on July 7 at The New School. The event's organizers (left to right: Eddie Bautista of the NYC Environmental Justice Alliance, Leslie Cagan, march organizer for People's Climate March, Rev. Clinton Miller of the Brown Memorial Baptist Church in Brooklyn and Estela Vasquez of SEIU Local 1199) provided news and updates on the September 21 demonstration, which is expected to be the largest climate change protest in history. For more, see peoplesclimate.org and globalclimateconvergence.org.

Teacher Bashing Knows No Summer Vacation

BY NORM SCOTT

In a closely watched case, a California judge ruled on June 10 that the state's teacher tenure laws infringed on the civil rights of students in schools in poor communities to a proper education guaranteed under the state constitution.

Pointing to evidence that one to three percent of teachers in California's public schools are grossly ineffective, Judge Rolf Treu wrote in his 16-page decision that teacher tenure laws "impose a real and appreciable impact on students' fundamental right to equality of education and that they impose a disproportionate burden on poor and minority students."

The astroturf parent group that pursued the lawsuit was funded by Silicon Valley millionaire David Welch. While Treu left California tenure laws in place until state appeals courts review his ruling, similar anti-tenure lawsuits have since been filed in several states, including here in New York.

Treu's ruling also drew a swift reaction from critics who asked why the judge focused his ire exclusively on a small group of allegedly ineffective teachers while ignoring widespread phenomena such as family poverty, lack of adequate school funding and high rates of teacher turnover.

"If it is a violation of the California state constitution to have tenure laws that make it hard to fire bad teachers in poor and minority communities, why isn't it a violation when the state and districts draw school boundary lines in a way that promotes deeply unequal, economically segregated schools that many strong educators won't teach in?" wrote Richard Kahlenberg, author and editor of numerous books on education policy, at *Slate*.

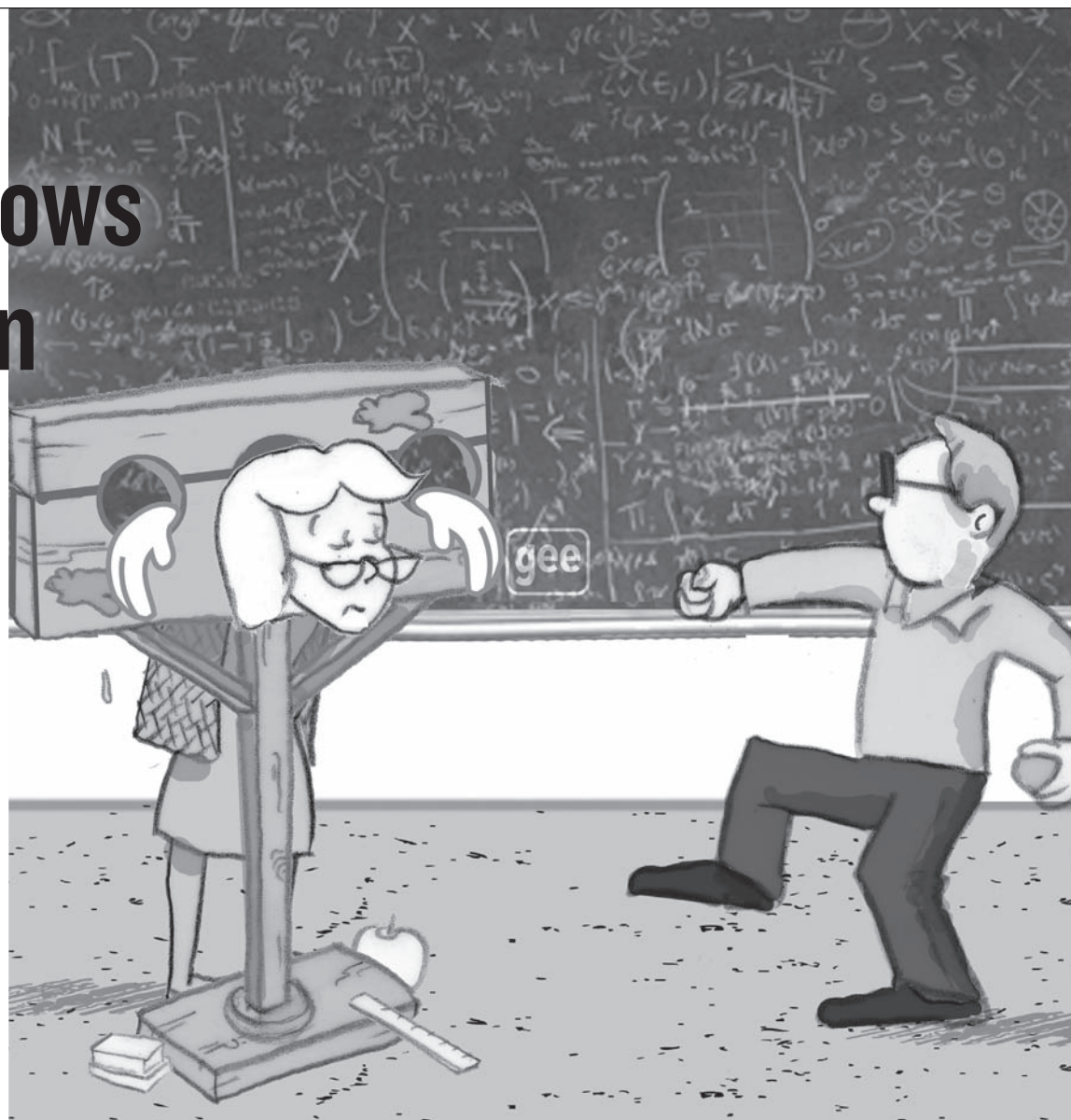
The unusual nature of the *Vergara* case was underscored by revelations that some of the

nine child plaintiffs attend charter schools where there is no tenure. Elizabeth and Beatriz Vergara (for whom the lawsuit is named) both attend a pilot school in the Los Angeles Unified School District that is free to let teachers go at the end of the school year for any reason, including ineffectiveness. Another plaintiff testified that her teacher Christine McLaughlin was a very bad teacher even though McLaughlin had received the 2013 Teacher of the Year award from the Pasadena (Calif.) Unified School District.

NOT A LIFETIME JOB GUARANTEE

Instead of being framed as a due process issue, teacher tenure has been framed as a lifetime job guarantee by corporate-backed school reformers intent on driving a wedge between parents and teachers. In fact, tenure has existed to prevent politics from entering the classroom and to protect teachers from retribution for well over 100 years, decades before unions even existed or had collective bargaining rights.

Tenure actually protects children rather than hurts them by allowing teachers to stand up for their interests. In my own school, when a principal tried to get teachers to push children who struggled with reading into special education classes as a way to make the school's reading scores look better, most teachers were able to resist (see sidebar).



GARY MARTIN

In a perfect educational world all teachers would be great and all supervisors would be benign, wise and fair and treat all teachers with respect and consideration. But alas — that is why there is such a thing as tenure, a fact that was highlighted during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's 12 years in office.

Under Bloomberg, the average number of years spent teaching by a New York City school principal dropped from 14 to nine, according to a 2014 report by the city's Independent Budget Office. Many of the new principals from that era had little or no teaching experience and were trained in how to undermine the teachers union's school-level leaders and target those teachers who they felt were not on their "team," even if they

were highly experienced. The situation worsened when former Schools Chancellor Joel Klein created a school funding formula that incentivized getting rid of more costly veteran teachers in favor of less expensive new teachers.

The drive to eliminate tenure can be understood as a part of a larger effort by a coterie of billionaire education "reformers," such as Bloomberg, Bill Gates and the Walton Family, who seek to deprofessionalize teaching and make it a low-skill, low-wage position in which an interchangeable workforce with no job security administers scripted curricula and oversees standardized test preparation. We are already far down this road and unfortunately the two major national teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, have collaborated more with the so-called reformers than they have opposed them.

It remains to be seen whether an anti-teacher tenure lawsuit can succeed in New York, which has more rigorous tenure laws than California — a three-year probationary period and an allowance for principals to extend probation year after year. The teachers union here in New York is hungry for a seat at the table with the Democratic Party. It also has little stomach to put up a real fight to hold principals and the higher-ups who install them accountable or to engage in a struggle to channel equitable resources to troubled schools, so the future of teacher tenure is uncertain.

Norm Scott is a former New York City schoolteacher. He writes regularly for ednotesonline.blogspot.com.

WHY TENURE HELPS TEACHERS HELP KIDS

I taught elementary school at PS 147 in Williamsburg for 27 years. I realized early on that building strong community roots with my students and their parents, all people of color, and fighting for their interests would make me a more successful teacher. That activism led to clashes with a white-controlled local school board. The district, where 90 percent of the students were children of color, was under the political control of my union, the United Federation of teachers (UFT). The political kingpin was the UFT district rep.

In 1973, two years after I received tenure, the district superintendent and the UFT representative visited my assistant principal. They both "suggested" he give me an unsatisfactory rating for the school year, the first step in forcing me out of my job. My assistant principal refused; he later joked that his hopes of becoming a principal ended that day.

Thus I became a fierce defender of tenure and also understood how supervisors could get rid of tenured teachers if they wanted to put some effort into it.

I also went on to fight for the kids inside my school, especially when we got an ambitious principal who used every trick in the book to try to boost test scores. A key was removing as many low-scoring children as possible

from the tests. If they were classified in any way as special needs, they could be tested separately and their scores would not be lumped in with the rest of the students'.

One of the more rambunctious boys I taught received speech therapy for a lisp. When my principal ordered him removed from my class on testing day, I balked. I even called the *New York Times* to complain and was told, "Doesn't that happen all the time?"

My principal also moved against another boy in the class whose apartment had caught fire, forcing his family to move in with a relative in another district a few miles away during the two months it would take to fix their apartment. But he kept coming to class. A few days before the test, I received a note that he had transferred to a school near his relative. The secretary told me the principal had ordered the transfer. She had assumed that he would score low (I won't get into the possible racial implications of her assumption) when in fact I had confidence he would do fine. I fought tooth and nail to keep him and threatened to make a big stink about it. She relented but with these words: He'd better do well on the test. And he did. And I was able to advocate for the kids because I had tenure.

— NORM SCOTT

Fracking

Continued from previous page

the world who are also fighting to stop the spread of fracking. She spent 10 days in March traveling in central California and meeting

with farmers and others who are trying to stop fracking from taking hold in one of the world's most productive agricultural regions.

Cipolla-Dennis also told *The Independent* that a contingent of Dryden residents will attend the September 21 People's Climate

March in New York City (see previous page). Fracking, she noted, leads to the release of high levels of methane, a greenhouse gas that is 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide. It's more than past time, she added, to move beyond an energy system based on fossil fuels.

"If we want to be a state looking to the future," she said, "we need to invest in renewable energy and support that."

Alex Ellefson and Giulia Olsson contributed reporting.

Fighting for Workers' Rights in NYC's Local Food Economy

BY MAGGIE DICKINSON

Amy's Bread, a purveyor of high-end baked goods to gourmet chefs and upscale stores like Whole Foods and restaurants like Le Cirque, profits from a brand that professes to care about every detail of its products. Pages have been written about the texture and taste of Amy's artisanal breads, describing the crunch of the crust, the tangy interiors and the depth of the flavors. But few, apart from Brandworkers, a local grassroots worker center that has been supporting organizing efforts at Amy's Bread since November, ask how the 190 employees who work around the clock to produce such perfect bread are treated or if they have a say in their working conditions. The workers at Amy's 33,000-square-foot manufacturing plant in Long Island City, Queens, contend that details like basic safety equipment, the availability of affordable health care and regular overtime pay are routinely overlooked.

Workers all along the food chain are subject to low pay and often hazardous working conditions. At Amy's Bread, workers report having to work two or three jobs in order to make ends meet and not being able to afford the health care plan offered by the company. Many are stretched thin, washing baking trays by hand when management refuses to make basic equipment repairs. According to a *Salon* report, workers regularly work for several hours after the end of their shifts, but are not given overtime pay; managers have reportedly told them that they are "not

ties to raise the minimum wage, and these efforts are starting to pay off. Kshama Sawant, a socialist city council member in Seattle, recently headed a successful campaign to pass a \$15-an-hour minimum wage in that city and President Obama has raised the minimum wage for federal workers to \$10.10 per hour.

It is not surprising that fast food jobs don't pay a living wage to the workers employed by giant corporations like McDonald's, Burger King and Taco Bell. For many, the fast food industry represents everything that is wrong with the American food system: low wages, unhealthy food produced unsustainably and sourced from mega-farms that are responsible for widespread ecological destruction. Small, local food producers are often seen as a panacea for the abuses of the large corporations that dominate the industry.

All the buzz about local, sustainable food systems has begun to capture the imaginations of New York City politicians. In early 2013, the New York City Economic Development Corporation launched the Food Manufacturers Growth Fund, which of-



ROYAL OLIVE/FELICKR

NEED MORE DOUGH: An employee at Amy's Bread makes another loaf of perfect artisanal bread while earning poverty wages. Campaigns are underway to improve wages and working conditions at New York City's food-manufacturing companies.

ers in local food manufacturing companies face the same problems as fast food and other low-wage workers throughout the U.S. economy, and city government's economic development efforts do not include provisions to ensure that they are treated fairly.

One of the biggest issues in New York City's food manufacturing industry (and in the low-wage economy as a whole) is wage theft. According to a recent report by Brandworkers and the Urban Justice Center, 79.2 percent of workers in the industry do not receive paystubs. This makes it very difficult for workers to prove that they have been underpaid or denied overtime because they have no proof. Only 4.7 percent of workers receive health insurance from their employers and wages average around \$10.48 per hour. There are some good jobs being created that pay upwards of \$20 an hour, but these well-paid jobs typically go to white workers, while workers of color and undocumented workers earn much less. Work conditions are dangerous, with 43.5 percent of the workers surveyed reporting being injured on the job. And failure to address dangerous conditions can have dire implications for employees: 13 workers have died on the job in New York City food manufacturing facilities since 2001.

Adjectives like organic, natural, sustainable, artisanal and local are proliferating. Despite the fact that these marketing terms primarily target affluent consumers who can afford to pay more, they do also speak to the growing concerns about the food we eat and how it is produced. This concern

rarely extends to the farm workers, warehouse workers, processors, stock clerks, cooks and cashiers all along the production line. Until recently, their working conditions and labor rights have largely been left out of the conversation about how to create a sustainable food system. But this is changing. Organizations like Brandworkers have helped food manufacturing workers to recover close to \$1 million in unpaid wages and to improve working conditions on the shop floor at New York City companies like Wild Edibles, a high-end seafood distributor; Pur Pac, a food distribution warehouse that supplies Chinese restaurants; and Flaum Appetizing, a kosher food manufacturer. In addition to the Amy's Bread campaign, workers are also organizing at Tom Cat Bakery in Long Island City.

Grassroots groups like Brandworkers are forging alliances with traditional labor unions through coalitions like the Food Chain Workers Alliance, formed five years ago. These groups are experimenting with new strategies and tactics to build worker power in the food industry: Instead of relying on top-heavy bureaucratic organizations, paid organizers and legal contracts between management and the union, emphasis is placed on direct actions led by the workers themselves on the shop floor. The gains of these campaigns have so far been modest. But, given the size of the food industry, which employs 20 million workers nationwide, and the growing public awareness around the food we eat, the potential for organizing in this sector is vast.

Maggie Dickinson is an anthropologist, writer and former labor organizer. She writes about food politics, poverty and activism and is currently working on a book about food stamps.

ORGANIZERS ARE EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW STRATEGIES AND TACTICS TO BUILD WORKER POWER IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY.

allowed to pay overtime." Perhaps most troubling is that when workers do speak up, they are threatened with lost workdays. Their organizing efforts have been met with threats that if they organize a union the business will close and put all the workers there out of a job.

The struggles of low-wage and food service workers have been receiving considerable attention lately. Recent campaigns like Fast Food Forward, which is organizing fast food workers nationwide to demand a \$15-an-hour minimum wage, have brought national attention to the working conditions and paltry wages of this group. These mass mobilizations across the country have put pressure on local, state and federal authori-

ties affordable financing to "enable eligible small businesses in the City's food manufacturing sector to expand." Policy makers like Christine Quinn and Melissa Mark-Viverito have been enthusiastic supporters of efforts to encourage local food production and distribution. They see the creation of a vibrant, local food economy as a way to create jobs, make healthy food more accessible to low-income communities and reinvigorate the city's industrial economy.

But, as the workers at Amy's Bread and other small, local food manufacturers can attest, such businesses are often no better than major corporations when it comes to paying fair wages or respecting workers' rights. The 14,000 New York City work-

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BY STEVEN WISHNIA

New York's new medical marijuana law, passed last month after last-minute negotiations among Gov. Andrew Cuomo and state legislators from three party factions, is one of the two most restrictive of the 23 state laws that permit some form of medical cannabis use.

The law allows marijuana use for only ten conditions, including cancer, HIV/AIDS, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord damage causing spasticity, epilepsy and inflammatory bowel disease. Cuomo insisted on deleting ten others, including muscular dystrophy and post-traumatic stress syndrome, before he would sign the bill. Even in its earlier form, the law would not have allowed cannabis use for conditions such as chronic pain. The herb will be distributed by up to 20 dispensaries that are supposed to open within 18 months. New Jersey, which has less than half as many people and less than one-sixth the land area, authorizes 10, although only three have opened since its law went into effect in 2010.

Most notably, the New York law prohibits patients from smoking marijuana on health grounds, upon Cuomo's insistence. Instead, it permits dispensaries to sell cannabis food products ("edibles") and extracts, including preloaded electronic cigarette products. It may also prohibit patients from vaporizing marijuana — although that and smoking are the simplest and most effective ways for people to get the drug into their systems immediately.

HOW I SELF-MEDICATE

I am a medical marijuana user. I have used it for about 20 years to help control and relieve my migraine headaches, which I get on average about two days a week. At least one per month is incapacitating enough to put me in a dark room with a Vicodin and an ice pack on my temple.

I either smoke, vaporize or eat it, depending on the circumstances. When I need a quick dose — such as when I'm trying to abort an oncoming migraine — I vaporize or smoke, as these methods have the most instantaneous effects. The effects of eating it take at least an hour to come on, and are much stronger.

When I need to stay functional for working or performing music, I use a combination of prescription painkillers and occasional tokes or vaporizer puffs. The marijuana augments the opioids so I don't have to take as many pills. I can't eat pot if I have to stay sober enough to work, so I do that only when I have a completely incapacitating headache or when I'm done for the day. (Also, it would hurt my lungs to smoke a dose that big.)

Cannabis was widely prescribed for migraines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but the main federal drug law says it has no legitimate medical use. The state laws that allow it often have limitations intended to prevent the appearance of pot-smoking license, at the price of denying access for people in pain. The New York law does not permit marijuana use for migraines, although I could certainly get a recommendation from my doctor.

Yet I was also unable to obtain it in California, the state widely derided for having the loosest medical pot law in the nation. When I popped a severe migraine while working on a documentary in Oakland in 2010, I went to a dispensary — and was dismissed within three minutes, because I wasn't a state resident. (Later that night, some kind soul committed a misdemeanor and gave me an appropriately laced brownie.)

In contrast, when I popped a severe migraine on a previous trip to San Francisco, I went to the emergency room and got a prescription for codeine.

— STEVEN WISHNIA

Will patients be able to get actual marijuana for vaporizing? "We don't know," says Julie Netherland of Compassionate Care New York — it would have to be approved by the state health commissioner.

Medical marijuana providers in Colorado and elsewhere have developed various cannabis extracts, tinctures and oils in the last few years. The concern about such products, says Netherland, is that if taken orally, they are much slower-acting than smoked or vaporized marijuana, and as they are highly concentrated, they are often more potent — so it's harder for patients to control their dose.

"It is ironic that at the same time some states are taking a harder look at the consumption of cannabis edibles (e.g., Washington and Colorado), other states like New York are mandating these sort of highly concentrated preparations in lieu of cannabis flowers," says Paul Armentano of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML). Minnesota's law, enacted in May, also does not allow patients to have whole-plant cannabis.

Despite all the restrictions, New York's medical-marijuana program might end up serving thousands of patients, says Netherland. Compassionate Care is pushing the state to get it running as soon as possible, she adds, and to give some patients the right to use it immediately. "A lot of these patients are terminally ill and won't be here in 18 months," she says.



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SUMMER EVENTS

Thursday, July 17, 6:30pm

OPENING NIGHT OF MARXIST INTENSIVE SEMINAR

Vijay Prashad: THE JOBLESS PRESENT

Thursday, July 24, 7:30pm

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Wednesday, July 30, 7:30pm

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Jean Renoir's THE RULES OF THE GAME

Discussant: **Peter Shulman**

NEW CLASSES

Thursdays, July 17, 24 and 31, 7:30 PM: **Radical Revisions: Why Does Who Wrote Shakespeare Matter** • Jenny Greeman, Melody Brooks, John Hudson ■ Saturdays, July 26, August 2, 9, 16 and 30, 10 AM (No session August 23): **Hubert Harrison, Theodore W. Allen, & the Centrality of the Struggle Against White Supremacy** • Jeff B. Perry ■ Mondays, beginning October 6, 5:30 PM: **Origin & Development of Bolshevik Party 1902-1914** • **Revolutions Study Group** ■ Mondays, beginning September 29, 7:30 PM: **French History by Marx & 19th C. French Literature** • **Literature Task Force** ■ Wednesdays, beginning October 1, 7:30 PM: **Spectres of the Dialectic from the Big Bang to the Multiverse** • Alex Steinberg ■ Thursdays, beginning October 2, 5:30 PM: **Zombie Capitalism: The Relevance of Marxist Analysis in the 21st Century** • Dan Karan ■ Fridays, beginning September 29, 6:30 PM (No Class Nov 28): **Hegel's Science of Logic** • Russell Dale

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A Combat Medic's Story

Editor's note: The names have a distant but familiar ring to them: Mosul, Tikrit, Fallujah, Ramadi, Tal Afar, Balad, Baquba, Samarra. Urban battlefields like these in northern and western Iraq were frequently in the news a decade ago as U.S. troops fought an insurgency while dodging everything from IEDs to RPGs.

When militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) routed the Iraqi Army and overran many of those same cities in late June, a war that most Americans had forgotten was suddenly back in the news. The media have since focused on who was responsible for "losing" Iraq and what military tactics and alliances should be pursued to win it back. Largely unacknowledged are the voices of veterans like Jenny Pacanowski, a former combat medic, who recalls her initial support for the war and the traumatic homecoming that followed, as well as the hard-earned lessons she drew from her experience, lessons that U.S. leaders remain unwilling to acknowledge.

By JENNY PACANOWSKI

On Christmas Eve of 2004 I flew out of Iraq for the final time, heading to Germany. My dreams of "saving the world" had been replaced with the fantasy of Iraq being transformed into a parking lot so we would never have to return.

"How did this happen?" I asked myself. "Who is this person speaking?"

My journey from idealistic American to disillusioned veteran cannot be summed up by one plane ride or discharge papers. For many of the people in my generation who fought in the Iraq War, being in the military and then becoming a veteran and transitioning into the civilian world brings with it countless complex variables and decisions.

What most civilians don't understand and what I discovered when I began to share my experiences is that telling the story replays the war and the trauma associated with it. I begin to relive each moment of fear, disillusionment and betrayal.

When I enlisted in the U.S. Army on April 23, 2003, it seemed like I had been awarded

a "golden ticket." The Iraq War had recently concluded with an apparently decisive American victory. A crowd of jubilant Iraqis had toppled a giant statue of Saddam Hussein in the center of Baghdad and welcomed our troops as liberators. I was 23 years old and the Army was going to train me as a health care specialist/combat medic. For my service, a jovial Army recruiter had promised that the military would erase the \$40,000 in federal student loans I had no hope of paying off after dropping out of college without a degree.

After completing basic training, I began receiving instruction in my chosen field. The first 12 weeks were filled with rigorous testing and practical applications of emergency medicine for civilians. In the final four weeks we trained to be combat medics. We tended to bleeding mannequins amid the fake sounds of suppressive fire and helicopters whirring noisily above us. Still, I felt no sense of an impending war. As both a trained health care specialist and a woman, I was certain I would be working in a hospital, not a combat zone.

ENTERING IRAQ

We deployed to Kuwait and then crossed into Iraq in January 2004 in jungle-green ambulances that seemed to be left over from the Vietnam War. Anyone who was afraid seemed weak to me, but very few people showed that side. As we blazed across the desert, I remembered the letter I received during basic training stating that we had won the war and recalled President George W. Bush standing on an aircraft carrier with the giant red, white and blue banner stating "Mission Accomplished" draped behind him. Strange as it sounds today, I was proud to be part of an army led by our commander-in-chief, who said our next



OCCUPYING IRAQ: Jenny Pacanowski (above) went to war thinking she was aiding a noble cause. She later changed her mind.

action would be to rebuild Iraq because we are the kind of country that brings democracy and freedom to the world.

Early in my deployment, we were invited to go into a local village near the Iraq-Syria border and give physical exams to the local children. The mission was called a "medcap," and I was elated to be helping children. We taught them how to suck on cough drops, gave them antibiotics and explained how antacids work. One young girl we examined had a heart valve pumping the wrong way. She was supposed to go on a "special list" for treatment in the United States but I later learned that she never made it to the States.

I was hopeful that the "medcap" would happen often and in every village, town and city we visited. However, that was the last time I treated a child in Iraq. The only other children I saw were blurry figures by the side of the road.

MEDICS ON THE MOVE

My platoon of 25 medics was dispatched to Al-Asad Air Base in the restive western province of Anbar. Our primary mission was to aid Marine convoys that were rolling out of Al-Asad to deliver supplies, including food, fuel and mail to troops at forward operating bases. Most convoys I participated in were seven to 15 vehicles long, and the medics were positioned in the second to last vehicle in front of the gun truck. Iraqi insurgents consistently attacked our convoys with IEDs (improvised explosive devices), small-arms fire and the occasional rocket-propelled grenade launchers. For the first six or seven months we had no armor or bulletproof glass for the ambulances and neither did the other vehicles in the convoy, because military planners had not expected this to be a long war. We placed sand bags and Kevlar blankets at our feet and backs and hoped for the best. If you were lucky, the lead truck was also a gun truck or at least there was someone in a Humvee with a semi-automatic weapon. The other trucks and Humvees were loaded with supplies.

I remember Iraqi kids waving and begging for candy as we drove by in the beginning. By August 2004 the children were throwing rocks and flicking the bird at convoys. I had numerous close calls with children and older people wandering in or near the roadway. I saw many incidents and heard of others in which my fellow soldiers drove over Iraqi civilians or shot at them after an attack on a convoy. As the conflict deepened, the Iraqi population became the enemy in our eyes/Anyone could be a "terrorist." We were losing our humanity in the brutality of the war.

I preferred to take the wheel even on ex-

tended trips. Driving the ambulance was the only thing I had control over. Survival on these roads meant developing the art of scanning for IEDs, which were usually hidden in cardboard boxes or dead animals or buried in a pothole.

When scanning, my eyes would move laterally from side to side and then down the road observing what other military vehicles were doing in front of me and what locals were doing around, searching for anything "out of place." I repeated this continuously every 20 to 30 seconds as I drove forward, knowing one mistake could leave me and my fellow soldiers dead or physically shattered for life. We sought to identify military-aged men (between 14 and 40 years old) and anyone with a cell phone. Since Iraq's infrastructure was destroyed, it was difficult to differentiate the normal trash in the road from a bomb. As we drove, it was 120 to 130 degrees every day and our vehicles felt like ovens.

AMBUSH IN SAMARRA

We also ran convoys at night. It was cooler but also easier for our attackers to conceal themselves. Many times right after the convoy arrived at the designated base, the mortars would pour in.

The moment I realized I was just another expendable body occurred while running an Army convoy at night through Samarra en route to Tikrit. An IED exploded underneath the second truck in the convoy and ripped through the passenger wheel. I could feel the concussive blast through my flak jacket from four vehicles away.

"Go! Go! Go!" someone blurted out over the radio.

Then began the "plink, plink, plink" sound of bullets smashing into metal as we tore through small arms fire. As the convoy slowed I realized where we were. "Fuck," I muttered under my breath. Headlights blazing and wrenches torquing, we were sitting ducks on top of Samarra's bridge, changing a blown tire.

My thoughts raced: "Who's in charge? What are we doing? Why am I here?"

We all lined the bridge's railing, our rifles locked and loaded. During my convoys with the Marines, they did not allow the medics to pull security, because who is going to save you if the medic is dead?

Whispers started. "Did you hear that?" ... "Under the bridge." ... "Should we shoot?" ... My heart was pounding. The longest 30 seconds of my life followed. Suddenly, the radio blared that members of the U.S. Army Third Infantry Division were under the bridge. We

THE DAMAGE DONE

1.455 MILLION *estimated Iraqi deaths due to U.S. invasion of Iraq (based on medical studies of increase in violent deaths in Iraq post-2003)*

6,822 *U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan (2014)*

2.5 MILLION *U.S. troops who have been deployed to Iraq & Afghanistan (2013)*

670,000 *Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with disability status (2013)*

247,000 *Iraq and Afghanistan veterans diagnosed with PTSD by VA (2012)*

30% *of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans treated by VA with PTSD*

30–200% *increased likelihood of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans committing suicide compared to civilian population*

\$970 BILLION *projected costs of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans' disability and medical care (through 2053)*

\$4–\$6 TRILLION *Total price tag of Iraq and Afghanistan Wars (through 2053)*

Sources: justforeignpolicy.com, antiwar.com, McClatchey, Washington Post, Daily Beast, Linda J. Bilmes/Harvard School of Government

COURTESY JENNY PACANOWSKI

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FOREIGN POWERS SET IRAQ ON A PERILOUS COURSE

By Patrick Cockburn

The meltdown of American and British policy in Iraq and Syria attracts surprisingly little criticism at home. Their aim for the past three years has been get rid of Bashar al-Assad as ruler of Syria and stabilize Iraq under the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki. The exact reverse has happened, with Assad in power and likely to remain so, while Iraq is in turmoil with the government’s authority extending only a few miles north and west of Baghdad.

By pretending that the Syrian opposition stood a chance of overthrowing Assad after the middle of 2012, and insisting that his departure be the justification for peace talks, Washington, London and Paris have ensured that the Syrian civil war would go on. “I spent three years telling them again and again that the war in Syria would inevitably destabilize Iraq, but they paid no attention,” the Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari told me. I remember a senior British diplomat assuring me in autumn 2012 that talk of the Syrian war spreading was much exaggerated.

Now the bills are beginning to come in, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), declaring a caliphate in northern Iraq and Syria. He has called on all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the Islamic state and effectively denied the

legitimacy of Muslim rulers throughout the world. No wonder Saudi Arabia has moved 30,000 troops to guard its 500-mile-long border with Iraq. There is a certain divine justice in this, since until six months ago the Saudis were speeding jihadists in the general direction of Syria and Iraq but is now dreading their return.

The success of ISIS depends on its ability to win spectacular victories against the odds and not on its primeval and brutal ideology. Victory in battle is what makes it attractive to young Sunni recruits, and that it can also afford to pay them. It cannot sit on its laurels for long but needs to secure the territories it has taken and make sure that its Sunni allies — tribal, Baathist, former members of Saddam’s army — who joined it to fight against Maliki will not find the new masters worse than the old and change sides. ISIS has moved swiftly to prevent this by demanding that the allies swear allegiance to the caliphate and give up their weapons. But beyond that ISIS must show that

success at Mosul was not a flash in the pan. As Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi put it recently: “There is no deed better than jihad, so to arms, to arms, soldiers of the Islamic state, fight, fight.”

The Baghdad government is hopeful that the White House will ultimately use drones against ISIS convoys even if it will not allow airstrikes by fixed-wing aircraft called in by American forward air controllers on the ground. Drones are particularly appealing to politicians because they appear to maximize damage to the enemy without American loss of life, which might anger voters back home. It is true that roving ISIS columns of trucks packed with fighters and heavy machine guns have proved effective so far. One Iraqi official compared them to “Arab raiders of old who would strike at caravans and then quickly withdraw.” But the core ISIS military leadership is experienced Iraqi military professionals who will make sure their men don’t make easy targets. Even so, any American military action, however, limited will buoy up the faltering morale of the Iraqi army.

The United States is pleased with the way drones have worked in Yemen and Waziristan against small groups of al-Qaeda-associated groups. But these isolated gangs are not a serious threat compared with what is brewing in Syria and Iraq, where there will soon be tens of thousands of trained, well-equipped and fanatical militants under a strong central command.

There is one important aspect of drone

this continue?

MICHAEL ZWEIG: The reason why we have such military expenses is to project U.S. interests around the world. That means U.S. corporate interests. This is in all the documents and strategic doctrines that presidents present to Congress. This is fundamentally a class question of protecting and projecting the power of American corporate interests, which are 180 degrees different than the interests of American workers. That shows not just in these strategic policies but also in the way that federal budget priorities are set and the funding of the military compared with

Continued on page 14



CARAVAN: ISIS fighters have moved quickly across northern and western Iraq.



INSURGENTS AT SUNSET: ISIS fighters stand guard at a checkpoint in Mosul.

warfare to which Washington has not given enough attention. Drones have hitherto been used largely against ill-equipped tribespeople in isolated parts of the world and not against well-organized groups such as ISIS. The latter may not be able to do much against drones at the moment they strike, but it will certainly retaliate later against American or European targets. Sunnis are attracted by the idea — and Hezbollah in Lebanon has the same attraction for Shias — that here at last is a Sunni military organization that can fight and win, however toxic its beliefs and behavior. Faith expressed through war and death is at the heart of jihadism, so drone strikes will inevitably bring retaliation.

Another round in the war in Iraq is gathering strength. ISIS and its allies have succeeded eas-

ily because of the dysfunctional nature of the Iraqi army and because they have been advancing almost entirely through sympathetic Sunni-dominated areas. They are now up against Shia militia and are coming into mixed or Shia neighborhoods where they will be resisted. But Iraq, more than most countries, is dominated by its capital of seven million people, and ISIS may want to establish that it has Baghdad under the gun, even if it cannot capture it.

The United States, Britain, France and their allies still do not have a policy to counter ISIS. Washington is trying to do now what it should have done in 2010 when it could have gotten rid of Maliki. Smugly triumphant at the time at besting the Americans in Iraq, the Iranians made the same mistake in thinking that Maliki was the safest bet for them, without realizing the degree to which his effort to monopolize power was degrading the Iraqi state and armed forces and enraging the Sunni minority.

While the Americans imagine the Iranians are full of devious plots, they are, in fact, aghast at what has happened. “They don’t want to overextend themselves,” said an Iraqi politician I asked about Iranian policy. “They are waiting for the Americans to do something.”

The Iranians have started acting in Iraq, though they have not committed many people. They are trying repeat their tactics in Syria, which is to create a parallel army out of the militias to buttress or replace the regular Iraqi



BANNER DAY: Demonstrators in Mosul cheer ISIS on.

army. They openly say they are doing so. But there is another aspect of their Syrian strategy which shows signs of appearing in Iraq and is bad news for Iraqis. This is to cut off electricity and water to rebel areas and pulverize any town or city held by the enemy with shell-fire and bombing without assaulting it, but forcing the civilian population to flee; then to advance cautiously and try to encircle enemy positions with checkpoints so they can be gradually strangled.

This appears to be what is happening in Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein and a city of 200,000 on the Tigris river. The city center is being systematically smashed, according to eyewitnesses, and any point of resistance is pounded by artillery. Iraqi security officials say they believe they have a good chance of clearing Salahuddin province of which Tikrit is the capital, but they admit



REFUGEES: Fleeing Mosul for Kurdish Iraq.



A CALL TO ARMS: Shia protesters in southern Iraq march in opposition to ISIS.



Michael Zweig

THE PRICE OF EMPIRE

By John Tarleton

Americans are accustomed to their military straddling the globe. It’s been that way for 70 years, few of which have passed without the United States engaging in fighting in one or more countries. Supporters say a large military is essential to protect the national interest. Meanwhile,

critics like Michael Zweig, a professor at the State University of New York-Stony Brook and author of The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret, insist that garrisoning the planet is counterproductive and involves tremendous opportunity costs here at home and that the costly and ultimately futile wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should be an occasion for rethinking the path we are on.

JOHN TARLETON: For the United States the combined financial costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars are well over \$1 trillion to date and annual military spending is running upwards of \$600 billion a year despite the lack of any serious military rival. Why does

that recapturing Mosul will take a long time. Meanwhile, ISIS has started bulldozing Shia shrines and religious buildings, opening the door to a ferocious religious war.

This article originally appeared in the (UK) Independent. Patrick Cockburn is the author of Muqtada: Muqtada Al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq.

To Fix VA Waits, Hire More Staff

BY ALEXANDRA BRADBURY

When months-long wait times for veteran health care burst into the headlines, corporate apologists had their solutions all ready to push.

Privatize the hospitals and give veterans a voucher to buy private insurance, crowded the *Wall Street Journal*, Fox and *Forbes*, gleeful at the chance to mention Veterans Affairs and “scandal” in the same sentence.

They never liked the VA, of course — for the same reason advocates of universal health care hold it up as a model. It’s completely government-run: no insurance companies or profit motives, just federal employees paid to give veterans the best care possible.

In light of the problems, were universal health care advocates wrong to tout the VA?

The short answer: no. The long waits and understaffing are real — but the VA’s quality of care, measured in outcomes and patient satisfaction, consistently rates better than the private system.

It’s not perfect, said VA workers we talked to, but it does better for veterans and their challenging health needs than the private system ever could.

“I love the VA and would never work in the private system again,” said one provider. “I used to spend an hour or two a day on the phone with private insurance companies or writing letters to them. ... [At the VA] it’s not about making a buck.” (The agency tries to rein in press contact, so some providers asked us not to use their names.)

The real solutions to the agency’s problems may sound familiar. The VA needs to hire more frontline staff and fewer managers. It needs to update an antiquated computerized scheduling system, expand facilities where need is growing and reduce missed appointments by offering rides.

It needs to use data such as wait time statistics as tools for improvement, not bludgeons. And it needs to act on feedback from concerned workers, instead of squelching it.

The Veterans Health Administration runs hospitals and clinics to care for veterans who got injured while serving. (It’s separate from

the Military Health System, which covers current service members.)

Low-income veterans and those rated 50 percent or more disabled by a service-connected injury can get comprehensive care and medications through the VA free of charge. For those with lesser disabilities, care for the service-connected disability is still free, but there’s a co-pay for unrelated care.

For some, the VA is their only option. For others, it’s their best option. A neurology provider estimated 50 percent of her patients have private insurance or Medicare, so they could seek care elsewhere, “but they choose to come see me, because the care is better.”

Thanks to new military and medical technologies, soldiers in the recent wars are surviving traumas that a generation ago would have killed them. “There’s much better shielding, thank God,” said Irma Westmoreland, a registered nurse and the Veterans Affairs chair of National Nurses United (NNU), “but now they come back with brain injuries, amputations, multi-system injuries.”

So health care workers at the VA develop special expertise, including in the kinds of psychological traumas veterans suffer. Specialists outside the agency “look to us on how to do it,” said Westmoreland.

“They’re closing mental health facilities and wards everywhere,” she added. “How does Congress really think privatizing access to this care is going to help? It’s not. They have less beds than we do.”

SCHEDULING HEADACHES

What’s causing the long waits and “secret wait lists” that are making headlines? The VA sent auditors around to investigate.

In Portland, Oregon, most employees interviewed opted to have a representative of the Government Employees (AFGE) union present, said Local 2157 President Amanda Schroeder. AFGE has 210,000 members at the VA.

The union rep was there not only to protect the member against coercion and retaliation, but also to compile the local’s own

recommendations — from the perspective of workers and patients, rather than agency bean-counters.

Two big themes came through, Schroeder said: the VA’s outdated scheduling system, and the fact that it’s “woefully understaffed.”

Clerks enter appointments into a cumbersome computer system that’s “maybe even pre-DOS,” one worker said. It won’t accept appointments beyond 90 days into the future. Clerks have to enter those into a second system, slowing everything down.

It also doesn’t help that scheduling is dictated rather than negotiated: you get a letter telling you the date and time of your appointment. If you can’t make it, you can try calling to reschedule, but the phone lines are often busy.

This means more missed appointments. The neurology provider estimated that 30-50 percent of her appointments are no-shows. “That’s dismal,” she said. “Other veterans could have been seen.”

Another reason for no-shows is the cost and difficulty of getting to the nearest VA clinic, especially for disabled patients. That’s why the no-show rate is worst at the end of the month, when patients’ wallets are thinnest.

A van service run by the nonprofit Disabled American Veterans helps, but you still have to get yourself to the shuttle’s meetup point, and the round trip can take all day. Better would be for the VA to provide rides to patients, as it used to.

Perhaps the biggest cause of the wait-list problem is that there simply aren’t enough medical staff.

Everyone’s stretched thin. Schroeder said physicians’ patient lists, which should be no more than 1,200 patients, can reach 1,700.

In the Augusta, Georgia, hospital where Westmoreland works, nurses in most areas are responsible for eight to 15 patients, and sometimes as many as 20. Surgeries are commonly canceled, she said, because there aren’t enough beds or nurses available.

As in the private sector, the agency isn’t obliged to bargain over staffing. And there’s

no federal limit on nurse-to-patient ratios, although NNU is calling for one.

When nurses do file objections to unsafe staffing, Westmoreland said, they can be blamed and targeted. AFGE members too have suffered reprisals for whistleblowing. Some were even told not to talk to their congressional reps, Schroeder said.

The federal agency charged with defending whistleblowers, the Office of Special Counsel, announced June 5 it’s investigating 37 cases of alleged retaliation against employees who spoke up about scheduling or patient care.

“There’s definitely a huge element of fear,” Schroeder said. “If it weren’t for the union, I think nobody would ever come forward with anything.”

‘HALF A TOOLBOX, 10 NAILS’

VA workers have been facing new pressure to meet federally determined performance metrics. The old standard was that vets should wait no more than 30 days for an appointment.

Word came down in 2011 of the new standard: 14 days. VA executives’ bonuses depended on hitting targets, which meant more grief for frontline staff. (Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki suspended the bonuses before resigning.)

Of course, everyone’s in favor of shorter waits. But changing the target doesn’t magically solve short staffing or scheduling snafus. Health care workers at the VA found themselves in the same boat as teachers who are told to boost their students’ test scores this year — but with the same class sizes, student problems and administrative burdens they had to work with last year.

“We just have been essentially told to build a house, and given half a toolbox and 10 nails,” Schroeder said.

Like many VA employees, she’s a disabled

WHAT NYC VETERANS THINK ABOUT THE VA

INTERVIEWS & PHOTOS BY
ALEX ELLEFSON & GIULIA OLSSON

How well does the Department of Veterans Affairs meet the needs of New York City-area veterans? And what could be done to improve the level of care? The Independent recently spent an afternoon talking with local vets outside the Manhattan VA hospital at First Avenue and East 23rd Street.



MR. BAKER
SERVED 1980–82
BEDFORD-STUYVESANT, BROOKLYN

The VA could use some improvement. They need more doctors. They need more funding. There’s a lot of red tape that has to be cut. You know, veterans are getting the short end of the stick on everything.

We shouldn’t have to wait. We fought, some of us died, some us got permanent injuries. We did our time. We paid our dues. There should be housing, there should be food if we need it. They spend billions of dollars on weapons systems. They should spend that money on our care.

It’s easy to send us out to war but they forgot their promise that when we got back, they would take care of us.



LEE ALBERTORIO
SERVED 2007–11
BUSHWICK, BROOKLYN

I think more government funding would help. A lot of people need these services and not a lot of resources are available to them.

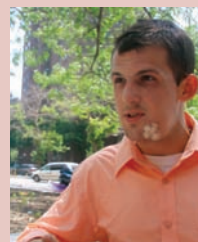
I’m actually unemployed right now so I don’t have insurance. This is the only place I can come to right now, it’s all I have.

MATTHEW LYON
SERVED 2007–10

If I could see one reform, I think the staff have a lot of stress and I think there should be something, not monetary compensation, but some kind of show of genuine appreciation for them. They’re being overworked and need something to boost morale. Maybe employ more people to lessen the load? And that would help them give veterans better, more personal care. But there needs to be something done



to help the workers, because if it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t come here.



JAY LITTLE
SERVED 2010–11
INWOOD, MANHATTAN

There’s a bunch of guys in here that’s not getting the care they need. They come in here, and they have to wait months and months and months. These people seriously got problems. They get an appointment for three months down the road —

that’s just too much time. I see why soldiers, veterans, go out and do the things they do. Like that one guy who killed himself just a while ago in Arizona.

It’s just upsetting that veterans can’t get the care they need. This is the only option for me because it’s free. Go anywhere else and I gotta pay from my pocket, \$400 or \$500 every month.

MOHAMMED AHMED
SERVED 2000–08
WOODSIDE, QUEENS





veteran herself, and passionate about the agency's mission. All the workers we spoke to wanted to improve a system they believe in, not scrap it.

The House and Senate passed separate bills in June to contract out more care. During a two-year trial period, both bills would require the agency to pay private providers to care for veterans who face long waits or 40-mile drives to the nearest VA facility. A reconciled bill is expected.

AFGE endorsed the Senate version, co-sponsored by Senators Bernie Sanders and John McCain, which also includes provisions to boost VA hiring and expand clinic space.

Putting a sunny face on it, the union commended Sanders for making sure the trial period tracks "the quality, cost, and timeliness of care secured from the private sector."

Still, the plan could be the thin end of the wedge of privatization, pushing veterans out

to navigate a fragmented private system on their own.

The VA's national coordination is one of its strengths: a centralized medical record, for instance, so all your providers can see the same test results. You never have to repeat an X-ray because you can't get the last one sent over.

Despite the short staffing, "I work with better clinicians at the VA than anywhere else I've worked," said a specialty provider who'd worked in private practice and for nonprofits.

While private surgeons get paid per surgery, the neurology provider said, "I tell patients all the time, 'I'm sending you to our VA neurosurgeon. They will only operate on you if you need it.'"

'MEATGRINDER WARS'

One more way we could help alleviate the strain on the VA, she said: "How about not

sending people into these meatgrinder war zones?"

"There's no reason to redeploy someone who's already rated 70 percent disabled for post-traumatic stress disorder," said Schroeder, "but we see it all the time."

The neurology provider said many of her patients, men in their twenties, are so traumatized from multiple deployments and blasts that they can hardly function.

"People who've suffered the kind of trauma they've seen, all their health problems are worse," she said. "They can't sleep, they're depressed, they're anxious — and that makes everything else worse."

"I often say if somebody could sit in my chair for a couple weeks, they would have a completely different perspective on war and what we do when we send people in."

This article appeared in Labor Notes #424, July 2014.

BETH WHITNEY

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SAT JULY 19 • 7PM • FREE

SCREENING: DROWNED OUT

Following an Adivasi community from the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh and featuring notable activists such as Arundhati Roy, this documentary draws attention to how the damming of the Narmada River is related to displacement and endemic inequality.

SUN JULY 27 • 7PM • FREE

AUTHOR DISCUSSION: WHY TORTURE (STILL) MATTERS — AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

With Rebecca Gordon
In her new book, *Mainstreaming Torture*, Rebecca Gordon argues that September 11 did not "change everything." Institutionalized state torture existed before the day of those attacks and remains as wrong today. And we can stop it.

MON AUG 4 • 7PM • FREE

AUTHOR TALK: SING IN THE MORNING, CRY AT NIGHT

With author Barbara J. Taylor and publisher Kaylie Jones
The novel *Sing in the Morning, Cry at Night* is a haunting family story set in an early 20th-century Pennsylvania mining town.

When I got out of the military, I didn't have a job, so I didn't have health insurance. I still don't have health insurance, so I wouldn't be able to see a doctor without the services of the VA. From my point of view, I don't complain. At least I have health care.



ERNEST PAVIA
SERVED 1967–68
UNION CITY, NEW JERSEY

I just went to the eye doctor. I was up there for two hours, and they wanted me to wait some more. They wanted me to wait so they could tell me I'm going blind?

I think the VA problems have to do with the amount of patients. Everybody is coming in now 'cause they're learning about the VA. The new veterans, from Afghanistan and Iraq, they're coming in to try and get their compensation. But they ain't giving it to them. They lose a leg, and they still don't give it to them.

HARVELL FORD
SERVED 1973–77
BRONX

I have a rare kidney disease and my doctors call me and let me know if my kidneys are going bad.



They constantly stay in touch with me. They remind me about my appointments and things. I mean, everything needs work but I prefer to come to the VA. If I go to any other hospitals, I have to wait forever. I come here, there may be a little wait time but I'm seen right away. I could walk right in and talk to my primary care doctor if I needed to. If you go into another hospital, into the ER at 10 o'clock at night, you're not going to see anyone for hours.



RAFAEL FONTANEZ MARTINEZ
SERVED IN VIETNAM
HOMELESS

The problem with the VA is this: If you're not 100 percent qualified, you're not entitled to total rights. It means if you're not 100 percent like me, it means they'll just put you on the back of the list. The whole VA needs to be restructured, starting from the bottom. There's actually a lot of good

work, but there's a lot of rotten apples that don't let the good workers do their job. They don't wanna process out applications. They use the discouragement tactic. I'm so disgusted at them.

PHOTO CREDITS: (L to R) 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 OLSSON; 4, 6, 8 ELLEFSON

Medic

Continued from page 9

almost shot our own guys thinking that the insurgents were going to ambush us or were setting up devices to blow up the bridge, something they did on a regular basis.

My idealism left for good that night and rage became my only defense against feelings of guilt and betrayal.

COMING HOME

Surviving Iraq was one thing. I also had to fight the Army itself. During the middle of my deployment, I learned they would not repay my student loans because they were not the “right” kind of loans.

After traveling from Iraq to Germany I managed to win an early discharge for “breach of contract” on the part of the U.S. Army (which is almost unheard of) and headed home to apply for my G.I. benefits. Upon returning to the States, I received a phone call from the Army board of corrections stating that if I had stayed in the Army they would have paid off my loans. I was informed that since I agreed to an early discharge they were unsure if my student loans would be paid, even though I served in Iraq. I proceeded to line up all my paperwork, got support from my local congressman and hounded the Army

northeast Pennsylvania, I could not sleep because the sounds of war were everywhere. When I drove, I was still on edge, scanning for IEDs. After my first year back, I was unemployed and drunk every night screaming, “My life is a nightmare.” I was embarrassed, lost and in complete denial that I was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. I thought I had no reason to live.

In July 2008, I attended my first veterans’ retreat at Martha’s Vineyard off the coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Warrior Writers and Combat Paper, a pair of projects dedicated to helping veterans tell their stories, hosted the event. For the first time since leaving active duty in 2005 I was in a community of veterans. It stirred something deep inside me that I was suppressing with alcohol and VA medications.

NO LONGER HEROES

Asked how I really felt about the war and my part in it, I spoke with anger, rage and regret about what I did “over there” and more accurately what I did not do to speak out against the carnage I saw inflicted on the Iraqis. My first poem was about how veterans are not “America’s heroes” but rather people afflicted with homelessness, addiction and violence. I sweated, cried and bled as I cut up my combat uniform and transformed my desert-camouflaged

schools and colleges and facilitating writing workshops all over the country for other veterans.

Having emerged from my own “dark place,” I doubt anyone really understands the cumulative effect of war besides the people who have lived it. When the media recently started blaring the names of the towns that I occupied in Iraq, I felt an overwhelming desire to block it all out. It was as if nothing had changed and no time had passed, it was more war and the same propaganda. In a brief idealistic moment, I wondered if I should go back and be the person to promote peace instead of more violence.

After leaving a writing retreat, I resolved to listen to President Obama’s June 19 press conference about the situation in Iraq. His words — “[the U.S.] will help Iraqis as they take the fight to terrorists who threaten the Iraqi people, the region and American interests” — were familiar and callous to someone who saw

Iraq and what our presence did to its people. We killed innocent civilians and called it “collateral damage,” we did not understand their 6,000-year old culture and disrespected their way of life. We won no one’s heart or mind. To use military force in Iraq again and believe it will make things better is delusional.

MESSANGER: Jenny Pacanowski speaks about her experience of coming home from war and battling PTSD.

My hope for the future is that the more than 2.5 million veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars will return home to a community that understands them and will help them understand themselves. This community will consist of other veterans, family members and concerned civilians who are committed to learning how to heal from war. We will share our journey and look to find the humanity in each other and extend it into the world. In my own work, if I can help one young person avoid going through what I experienced, or if I can help one veteran not commit suicide, then what I’m doing will be worth it.

Jenny Pacanowski lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She will perform at the Warwick (NY) Summer Arts Festival on July 23. For more about the Warrior Writers Project and Combat Paper, see warriorwriters.org and combatpaper.org.



ELLEN DAVIDSON

TO USE MILITARY FORCE IN IRAQ AGAIN AND BELIEVE IT WILL MAKE THINGS BETTER IS DELUSIONAL.

relentlessly until a congressional inquiry let to me being awarded partial repayment of my loans for time served, just under four years.

I was exhausted. But that was just one battle. The war to bring my soul home from Iraq had just begun. Within the first few months of returning to my home in

fatigues into paper that I could write my experiences on. Writing allowed me to take the demons in my mind and put them on paper where they could exist outside of myself. It saved my life.

Since then, I have continued to write and read my poetry while also branching out into playwriting, public speaking at high

EMPIRE

Continued from page 10

other alternative uses of those funds.

JT: *It’s hard to see how U.S. interests have been advanced by wars like Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam. Yet, there seems to be little desire in elite circles to reflect on and learn from these experiences.*

MZ: Well, I do think that President Obama and his immediate circle of advisors have learned some lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, even though we see a lot of Dick Cheney in the media. Obama is projecting force through the use of drones and special operations forces, and things that are not as obviously militaristic. Tactical lessons have been learned about how best to project power.

JT: *How did we come to have a full-time war economy?*

MZ: At the end of World War II, the United States emerged as the dominant economic power in the capitalist world while the British and the French were receding as colonial powers. The United States undertook in that circumstance to assert itself economically, but also politically and militarily, and established a standing military, which was new to this country. Eisenhower warned about it in 1961 in his famous farewell address he gave on the military industrial complex.

JT: *Since 9/11, the military has grown ever larger.*

MZ: Yes, we’re constantly being told there’s no money, we have to cut, cut, cut. There’s lots of money, and it’s just a matter of changing priorities and redirecting those resources.

I was in Brooklyn the other day and did a little calculation from the data on the National Priorities Project website (see sidebar on page 10). The people of the 9th congressional district, which encompasses a big swath of central and east Brooklyn, sent \$677 million to the Pentagon this year. If you take just 15 percent of that, or \$100 million, you would get 2,675 university scholarships, 1,875 Pell Grants, 100 police officers, 1,400 veterans receiving VA medical care, 2,000 low-income people with health care, 1,300 low-income children receiving low-income health care, 100 elementary school teachers, 1,300 Head Start slots for small children, 8,375 households getting solar power retrofits and 4,000 getting wind power retrofits.

Keep in mind, that’s just one of New York City’s 13 congressional districts and one out of 535 congressional districts in the country.

JT: *You could shrink the military budget by half or more, still have a substantial military and begin to address a tremendous number of other needs. But that doesn’t seem to be the direction of things.*

MZ: It’s important for us to ask what it takes to really be a secure country. And in my view, the American people would be secure if

they were healthy, if they would have jobs that paid living wages and an infrastructure that was stable and efficient so that the economy and businesses could grow.

Those are the things that are possessed by a healthy and educated population, a skilled population, a population that’s fully employed, a population that can live on the wages that it makes, those are things that make for a secure people. People are still afraid of being sick, still afraid that they’re going to be bankrupted by an illness even with the insurance that they have. We could have a military, but a much smaller one that protects the country from aggression, but without having the capacity to have hundreds of bases all around the world and all the expenses that are associated with those.

JT: *One group for whom there never seems to be enough resources are veterans. That seems especially cynical.*

MZ: If you look at who’s in the military, they’re basically working-class men and women who join the military for a variety of reasons. And they’re treated like workers are treated anywhere. They’re treated like shit. Everybody stands up and says how wonderful veterans are and always thank them for their service, but when it comes time to really deliver for these men and women, the corporate elites and the government that serves them have about the same attitude towards those workers in the uniform as they do workers who are working in a mine or a mill or in an office someplace, or in a call center, which is no regard at all.

Warehousing Palestinians

BY JEFF HALPER

Both the blatantly disproportionate response to the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli boys in June and, as I write in mid-July, the all-out air strikes on Gaza have been cast by Israel as military operations: Operations Brothers' Keeper and Operation Protective Edge. Neither had anything to do with the operations' purported triggers, the search for the boys or rocket fire from Gaza.

Palestinian cities supposedly enjoying extra-territorial status were invaded in Operation Brothers' Keeper, more than 2,000 homes were ransacked, some 700 people arrested. Who knows as yet the devastation wrought on Gaza — as *The Independent* goes to press, close to 200 are dead in more than 1,300 airstrikes, mostly civilians according to reports; deafening around-the-clock bombing of communities by American-supplied F-15 and artillery from the ground and sea that amounts to collective torture; Israel's foreign minister calling for cutting off all electricity and water amid threats to completely obliterate Gaza's infrastructure; and the prospect of almost two million people being permanently imprisoned, reduced to bare existence just this side of starvation.

What is clear is that the military operations had a purpose of their own, that they

would have been launched regardless, that they were merely waiting for a pretext. They had to come because the vacuum left by Secretary of State John Kerry's failed peace process initiative had to be filled.

In fact, the end of the Kerry initiative marked the culmination of a decades-old campaign, systematic and deliberate, of eliminating the two-state solution. From the start, in 1967, successive Israeli governments officially denied that there even was an occupation, claiming that since the Palestinians had never had a state of their own they had no national claim to the land. The Labor Party denied the very applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention that protects civilian populations finding themselves under hostile rule with no means of self-defense — and which had been formulated specifically with the intent of providing the protection denied to Jews during the Holocaust. It therefore embarked on a project of estab-

lishing settlements, now numbering some 200, in clear violation of international law that prohibits an occupying power from moving its civilian population into an occupied territory.

Later governments fragmented the Palestinian territories into tiny and impoverished enclaves, imposed the economic closure and impediments to Palestinian movement of these past 21 years and initiated the construction of the West Bank barrier, the apartheid wall.

It has now fallen to Netanyahu to kill the two-state solution once and for all. The first step was to decisively end Kerry's

initiative and any that might follow it. Netanyahu did this by raising his demands to intolerable levels. He declared that the Palestinians must relinquish their own national narrative and civil rights by recognizing Israel as a Jewish state, and he held to the position that Israel would permanently retain East Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley and Israel's main settlement blocs (about a third of the West Bank), as well as the water and natural gas resources, the country's electro-magnetic sphere (communications) and all of its airspace.

He left the Palestinians with less than a Bantustan, non-viable and non-sovereign, a prison composed of the 70 islands of Areas A and B of the West Bank, ghettos in "east" Jerusalem, tightly contained enclaves within Israel and the cage which is

Gaza — half the population of the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River confined to dozens of islands on 15 percent of historic Palestine.

The end of the political process, futile as it may have been, triggered the collapse of the status quo as we have known it for the past 47 years. It set in motion a series of events that will confront us with two stark alternatives regarding Israel and Palestine: either the permanent warehousing of an entire population or the emergence of a single democratic state.

Operations Brothers' Keeper and Protective Edge represent the imposition of a warehousing regime, of outright imprisonment of an entire people. The seemingly blind and atavistic destruction and hatred unleashed on the Palestinians in these operations is not merely yet another "round of violence" in an interminable struggle. It is the declaration of a new political reality. The message is clear, unilateral and final: This country has been Judaized and it is now the Land of Israel in the process of being incorporated into the state of Israel.

Warehousing is worse than apartheid. It does not even pretend to find a political framework for "separate development," it simply jails the oppressed and robs them of all their collective and individual rights. It is the ultimate form of oppression before actual genocide, and in that it robs a people of its identity, its land, its culture and the ability to reproduce itself, it is a form of cultural genocide that can lead to worse. This is what Israel has left the Palestinians, this is the meaning of the bombing of Gaza, the terrorizing of the West Bank and the ongoing destruction of Bedouin and Palestinian homes within Israel.

Assuming that apartheid and warehousing are absolutely unacceptable "solutions" and, indeed, are ultimately unsustainable, generating even more violence and conflict in the volatile Middle East, Israel has in fact left us with only one workable, just and lasting way out: a single democratic state in Palestine/Israel that guarantees the individual and collective rights of all its citizens. This is what we must now struggle for.

Jeff Halper is the director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD). This article was adapted from an earlier version that appeared at mon-doweiss.net.



OPEN-AIR PRISON: Palestinian workers in the West Bank wait to pass through the Israeli-manned checkpoint outside Bethlehem. In the background stands the 26-foot-tall apartheid wall that traverses the length of the West Bank.

JOSH KOUGH/FLICKR

THIS JEW CAN'T SUPPORT ISRAEL

Growing up in my Jewish family, it was a given that Jews supported civil rights, opposed the Vietnam War and believed in education, science and progress. This didn't make it easy to be a teenager in a small working-class town in central Pennsylvania, an area not known for either diversity or liberal views at the time. Israel was a distant place where survivors of the brutal European Holocaust struggled to live in peace, occasionally beset by terrorists and attacking armies from the surrounding countries.

When I went to college, naturally, I became active in the late-1970s campus movement for divestment from South Africa. Somewhere along the line, I realized that Israel was the only country in the world that violated the international arms embargo on the apartheid state, and that Israel was on the wrong side of all the struggles for freedom and national liberation I supported, that it backed dictatorships in Guatemala, Chile, Brazil and elsewhere.

The more I learned about Israel, the more I realized that what I had been taught growing up was a lie. But I also discovered that, even in the progressive movements in the 1980s, the issue was contentious. I spent my twenties working at the *Guardian* radical newsweekly, a paper that staunchly supported Palestinian rights; periodically we

would lose a significant segment of our readership due to our alleged "anti-Semitism," and we would receive occasional bomb threats from the Jewish Defense League, a nasty organization whose members would physically attack participants in pro-Palestine demonstrations.

This kneejerk labeling of critics of Israel as "anti-Semitic" (or in my case, a "self-hating Jew") made me even more firm in my conviction that it was the special obligation of U.S. Jews to stand against racism in Israel. As more of us demanded equal rights for all in Israel/Palestine, it became harder to smear supporters of Palestine as "anti-Semitic." The needle on this debate has moved considerably since the 1980s, when just to say the word "Palestinian" was considered inflammatory, even in some left circles.

These days, as Israelis rampage through the streets of Jerusalem calling for killing all Arabs and Gaza is once again bombarded in a storm of collective punishment, the racist underpinnings of the Jewish state become harder to ignore. This is drawing larger numbers of people into pro-Palestinian protests on the streets of this country.

Indeed, at a July 13 vigil I attended in Woodstock, New York, there were many faces I had never seen before. But not everything has changed. A hostile group of tourists walked by and began berating us for our stance. "You should try talking to some Jews," said one man. "We are Jews," two of us answered simultaneously. "Then you're fucked up," he snapped.

In the past decade, I have made a point of traveling to Israel/Palestine, so that I can both show my solidarity in person and bring back firsthand accounts of the conditions in the occupied territories and within the formal borders of Israel. I have never encountered anything but warm welcome from the Palestinians I encountered.

When I return, every time I speak as a Jew of personally seeing demolished Palestinian houses, military checkpoints, the concrete wall separating communities from their farmland, the overcrowded refugee camps built as temporary solutions 60 years ago, I like to think that it widens the crack that has been opening up in the U.S. Jewish community, leaving just a little more space for honest discussion of what is being done in our name.

— ELLEN DAVIDSON



SPEAKING OUT: Ellen Davidson (center) participates in a vigil for Palestinian rights.

CARLSTROCK

Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibition

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

You are recreating the very racism this art is supposed to critique,” I yelled. The visitors lowered their cameras. Just seconds ago, they had been aiming their lenses at the sculpture of a 40-foot-tall, nude Black female sphinx coated in white sugar. Many posed under its ass; some laughed and pointed at its vulva. As I watched their joking, my thoughts spun and I walked into the crowd, turned to face them and began yelling.

It wasn’t my rage, it was our rage. Since May, gentrified Brooklyn buzzed with talk of the new Kara Walker exhibition, a giant sculpture of a Mammy sphinx at the derelict Domino Sugar Factory. On the Internet, one could see it was the size of a house, with full African lips and a flat nose, a doo-rag knotted on its forehead. Officially titled *A Subtlety*, it received glowing reviews on NPR’s *All Things Considered* and the *New York Times*. I was curious but also felt a low alarm going off in the back of my head. In early June, I went to the exhibition. The anxiety increased when I saw the factory — in line, nearly everyone was white. The alarm rang louder.

or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant. Okay, I thought, at least a sign is up. And with the news videos, the reviews and the Creative Time webpage, maybe visitors won’t be carried away by a naked Black female sculpture and actually see the painful history it represented.

Inside the factory, cool, sweet air filled my nose. It was a rusted cathedral of industry, held up by blistered girders. Across the warehouse I saw the white Mammy sphinx. Visitors bunched around caramel-like statues of children holding baskets. They were antebellum figurines of slave boys, made of resin coated in molasses. The irony of them molded into sugar was of course symbolic of the money and power distilled from their bodies. Viewers seemed to get it. Maybe, I thought, it was safe to turn off the alarm? And then I saw a balding white father, posing with his son next to one of the boy statues, his arms folded across his chest “gangsta” style as the mother took a photo.

out me. “Don’t they see that this is about rape?” I muttered as another visitor stuck out his tongue.

What is the responsibility of the artist? Is it different for a Black artist who creates in the midst of political struggle? I first saw Walker’s work more than a decade ago in Boston and remember studying her panorama of black silhouettes. Violent sex, violent lashings, prancing slave owners and mutilated Black bodies wrapped the room. The spark of her art came from taking the form of 19th century visual vocabulary, quaint history book illustration, and using it to represent the actual brutality occurring at the time. Standing there, I admired her technical ability and her vision, her ability to force us to read the suppression of real violence under an epoch’s ideology. And yet, I wondered even then if exposing the details of Black victimization was truly freeing if it simply triggered

Again Creative Time staff handed out release forms. But now a new team was there, people of color, working with the We Are Here project. They gave us stickers reading “We Are Here,” meant to remind white visitors that the descendants of slaves were in the room, present and watching.

I wasn’t a part of the group officially, but I was part of the collective mind. Again we entered the factory, again the sickly sweet air swept over us. My friend, a dancer, looked at the molasses-covered slave boys holding their heavy baskets and remarked on how it injured their backs to carry that kind of weight. Again, we were seeing the sculptures from an historical perspective, one that our lives are rooted in. She pointed to an older white woman photographing her daughter smiling next to a slave boy. We were both getting angry. Others in the group were too.

A few of us went to the backside of the Mammy sphinx. A crowd milled around and lights flashed from their cameras. I was late for a meeting and going to leave when a white man kneeled and aimed his camera at his Asian-American friend, who made a goofy face under the giant buttocks. Something snapped. I strode to the front, turned around and yelled at the crowd that when they objectify the sculpture’s sexual parts and pose in front of it like tourists they are recreating the very racism the art was supposed to critique. I yelled that this was our history and that many of us were angry and sad that it was a site of pornographic jokes.

A STUNNED SILENCE

A stunned silence paralyzed the crowd until I walked back, and then loud talk rose like a tornado. One of the Creative Time curators came up to me and said if I was going to make statements to let people know I wasn’t part of their organization. A friend cut in, saying loudly that I didn’t have to say shit. They got into a debate that heated up into a verbal fight. Visitors came up to me, some saying I was wrong; others saying I was right.

It was like a sleeping beehive had been kicked over. Security was called and it got tense. I missed most of what happened because people were in my face. By the time I left, one friend was in tears and the curator was very nearly there too, clutching her writing pad like a shield.

It felt great to confront the “white gaze,” the entitled buffoonery of the visitors. But why did we have to? Why did the organizers of We Are Here even have to do that work? Wasn’t the job of Walker or at least of Creative Time’s staff to curate a racially charged artwork? Yes, Walker has the freedom to express herself. Yes, Creative Time has the freedom to organize it. But what do you expect will happen if you put a giant sculpture of a nude Black woman, as a Mammy no less, in a public space?

People are going to bring prejudices and racial entitlement into the space. That’s clear. Instead of challenging the power dynamics of white supremacy, Walker and Creative Time, in their naïveté or arrogance, I don’t know which, simply made the Domino Sugar Factory a safe place for it. Thanks for nothing, Ms. Walker!

After the We Are Here protest and my angry outburst made a few waves, the sad thing is that thousands of visitors were still seeing a sculpture that symbolizes the history of racial violence with no guidelines on how to interpret it. Among them were visitors of color who faced the continued mockery of their history. One friend wrote to me, “When I went, 2 white men stood arm and arm smiling for a ‘fb pic’ with her backside in the background. I wanted to cry, scream and break their faces. It made me so sick.”

If visitors have the freedom to express their contempt for our history, we have the freedom to protest them. When we do, we let everyone know that unlike the mute Mammy sphinx, we can speak for ourselves.

Nicholas Powers is a professor of African-American literature at SUNY Old Westbury and the author of Ground Below Zero.



MASSIVE: Kara Walker’s 75-foot-tall, sugar-coated Mammy sphinx was the centerpiece of a recent exhibition on the history of the sugar trade. The exhibition was housed at the soon-to-be-demolished Domino Sugar Factory in Williamsburg.

IAN CROWLEY/FUCKR

WHAT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ARTIST? IS IT DIFFERENT FOR A BLACK ARTIST WHO CREATES IN THE MIDST OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE?

‘THROUGH THE EYES OF OTHERS’

The alarm is a reflex most minorities have. It’s a rising anxiety that signals you are surrounded by people too privileged to know they’re hurting you. Or who would not care if they did. It can beep quietly. Or blare like a foghorn. The alarm is part of the psychological package that W.E.B. Du Bois described in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* as, “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”

As the long line moved under the bright sun, I feared the mostly white visitors would not see me or the violent history the art reflected. Staffers of Creative Time, the non-profit that commissioned the work, were giving visitors release forms. We signed and walked through the gate. On the side of the building was the work’s full title, *A Subtlety*,

BLACK PAIN, WHITE LAUGHTER

Anger shot up my body like a hot thermometer. Face flushed, I walked to the Mammy sphinx. Couples posed in front of it, smiling as others took their photos. So here it was, an artwork about how Black people’s pain had been transformed into money was a tourist attraction for them. A few weeks ago, I had gone to the 9/11 museum and no one, absolutely no one, posed for smiling pictures in front of the wreckage.

I caught the eye of the few people of color, we talked and shook our heads at the jokey antics of the white visitors. We felt invisible. So did our history. The feeling stung and we wanted to leave. I forced myself to go the backside of the statue and saw there what I expected to see, white visitors making obscene poses in front of the ass and vulva of the *Subtlety*. A heavy sigh fell

the pain of people of color, and in the precarious atmosphere of the nearly all-white art world at that.

Now, more than a decade later, I was going for a second visit to see *A Subtlety*. I brought my friend Nia. “Brace yourself,” I told her. Sure enough, she saw what I had seen. Of course we both marveled at the immensity of the Mammy sphinx. Just the sheer size of it pushed us back on our heels. The physical weight of all that sugar, a symbol of the pain and profit wrung from our ancestors, our Black bodies, fell on us hard. All those lives destroyed, I thought, all that death. And then a white couple goofily posed in front of the Mammy sphinx’s breasts. Nia and I left.

WE ARE HERE

On my last trip there I was with a group of friends. Again we stood under a bright sun in a long line.

Filling Public Space With Beauty



HARLEM HOSPITAL CENTER: Reclaiming a legacy.

BY MIKE NEWTON

In New York City, space is always the issue. Sure, we have other issues too, but questions about space — how much is available, who owns it, who has access to it — set the parameters for many of the debates, struggles and policies that define this city. Art has always been a part of the city, too. From the first artwork purchased by the city in 1790 — a portrait of George Washington that hung in City Hall — to the progressive-minded Depression-era murals made through the federally funded Works Progress Administration (WPA), and on to the graffiti and guerilla street art of today: the art that appears in all these strange, sometimes cramped spaces has helped shape public life in New York since the earliest days of the United States.

In 2014, city space is more hotly contested than ever, raising questions of what roles public art will take from here on out. Will New York's public art find ways to channel and reify the incredible creative energies of the city, or will it reflect the board-approved sensibilities of corporate donors? Will it be a source of beauty and gratification for New York's neighborhoods, or will it become what theorist Rosalyn Deutsche has called a "weapon of redevelopment"?

As space in New York becomes ever more privatized, it's worth reflecting on the amazing wealth of public art still to be found throughout the city. Here are three public mural projects worth seeking out this summer.

KEITH HARING ON THE MOVE

In 1980s New York, Keith Haring was all over the place. He made ephemeral chalk drawings in subway stations — street art, before people really called it that — while selling his paintings in tony art galleries; he applied his thick-lined, pared-down drawing style to children's books and baby's bibs, as well as to images of queer orgies, genocidal violence and hallucinatory science-fiction scenes. He embodied

contemporary art at both its most and least commercial, with a dedicated downtown storefront selling licensed merchandise and a bevy of socially-conscious murals in public. There was a time in New York when you might have been able to stumble onto a new Haring piece, but now, 24 years since his untimely death, only a handful of his public works remain.

Haring's untitled mural is one of the first things you see when you walk into Woodhull Hospital, a huge, shimmering brick-and-glass compound that looms over the northern edge of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Haring painted several murals in Woodhull over the course of a week in 1986, as a sort of gift to the hospital (in honor of the AIDS research happening there). The lobby mural is bright and colorful, but with an underlying and distinctly Haring-esque darkness.

Much of Haring's work involves the human body in transitory states: people moving and people changing. Because faces are so rarely depicted in Haring's paintings, these works tend to be all about gut-level, bodily experience. Haring's scenes find their characters in moments of play, epiphany, agony, orgasm or a combination of all of the above.

The lobby mural includes large bodies that seem to have been twisted and broken, above a procession of primary-colored people in the midst of unidentifiable actions. In any given hospital, most of the art you're likely to see will probably be something vaguely, unobtrusively pleasant, probably meant as a simple distraction. But Haring's mural is about the painful as well as the pleasant; as it turns out, Haring's multifaceted approach to art is just the thing for a place like Woodhull, where illness, health, life and death are all happening at once.

DANIEL HAUBEN'S BRONX

Installed along the walls of the Bronx Community College library, Daniel Hauben's paintings recall the sun-coated landscapes of the 19th-century Hudson River School; the colorful, old-world populist scenes

painted by the baroque-era Brueghel family; and rusty, modernist realism in the Edward Hopper vein. But then, there are the modern details: unmistakable bits of the present-day world peeking through in compositions that could otherwise have felt at home a century or two ago.

In fact, these distinctly old-fashioned works were all made during the last half decade or so: it's one of the largest public art commissions the Bronx has seen since the WPA era of the 1930s. In one of two larger works installed in the library's stairwells, the college's "Hall of Fame" — a colonnade of classically-sculpted bronze busts depicting American heroes — stands against the Hudson River, and in the distance: the Park Avenue Bridge, a chunk of machine-made industrial/utilitarian architecture straight out of the mid-20th century. Amid the autumnal splendor of the Hudson Valley — the lush forests and golden light that has inspired generations of landscape painters — there are the condos and housing projects, the elevated trains and wire fences of the modern-day Bronx. At first, these details might seem like reluctant, perfunctory nods to the present moment, but it's not that simple. Hauben, who was born and raised in the Bronx, was aiming for timeless romanticism mixed with 21st-century veracity: those train tracks and high-rises are as much a part of this landscape as the rivers and valleys and, as such, every bit as beautiful.

It's a very particular kind of beauty, though, owing as it does to Eurocentric and aristocratic traditions. One wonders if this mannered style was really the best way to depict a place as ethnically and culturally diverse as the Bronx.

But art means different things in public than it does in private: this kind of art might bespeak a sort of old-money elitism when traded from mansion to mansion, but as something made for the public, these idealized scenes recall other old and noble kinds of ideals: the worth of the spectator/citizen and the richness of public life. After all, we deserve beauty, don't we?



LANDSCAPES: A Daniel Hauben painting at Bronx Community College.

HARLEM CLASSICS

Not long ago, the WPA murals at the Harlem Hospital Center (HHC) were barely visible: though they represented some of the first major public commissions for Black artists in America, the works were hidden behind walls, left to decay and disrepair, or stuck somewhere out of view. The hospital itself is reported to have rejected some of the initial mural designs back in 1936: as summarized at the time, the "hospital is not a Negro Hospital therefore why should it be singled out for treatment with Negro subject matter?" Hospital administrators said that such murals may prove inappropriate in the long run, with the claim that soon enough, Harlem would no longer be a majority-Black neighborhood.

Now, the murals are almost impossible to avoid: as part of a recent, massive restoration project, images from the murals stretch along a full block of Lenox Avenue in a backlit display five stories high. Indeed, it seems that the murals have turned from a forgotten chunk of the hospital's history into something integral to HHC's institutional identity and the centerpiece of its (literal) public façade.

Right now, only one of the original murals is accessible to the general public: Georgette Seabrook's 1937 *Recreation in Harlem*. As with many WPA-funded public art projects, this piece packs a subversive political message under charm-



PEOPLE IN MOTION: Keith Haring in Bed-Stuy.

ing, colorful imagery. In Seabrook's painting, Black and white children attend the same schools, Black and white teens go out together on picnics and Black and white neighbors enjoy each others' company: a radically simple vision of integrated public life.

Meanwhile, the building exterior shows excerpts from Vertis Hayes's 1937 *Pursuit of Happiness*: an epic piece depicting the African diaspora and the migration of Black workers from the scorching South to the industrialized North. By juxtaposing scenes of life in an African village alongside images of American hardship, the mural makes powerful allusions to the history of American slavery.

It took a while, but HHC's 1936 claim is starting to come true: now, more and more white people are moving to Harlem, and local landmarks are threatened by rising rents and gentrification. Perhaps this is why HHC has chosen to highlight this part of its past. As the neighborhood changes, the hospital that once tried to disavow itself of "Negro" subject matter stakes its claim as an essential site in Black American history. You can't miss it.

HOK

MIKE NEWTON

MIKE NEWTON

THE INDEPENDENT July 15–August 11, 2014 17

All the Parking Lot is a Stage

INTERVIEW BY
ASHLEY MARINACCIO

What's poetic about a parking lot? Plenty, it turns out, when you infuse a little Shakespeare. The most poetic patch of asphalt in New York City is a municipal lot in the Lower East Side, at the corner of Ludlow and Broome Streets, where the 20th season of a neighborhood summer tradition known as Shakespeare in the Parking Lot is being staged. On the bill is *Twelfth Night* and *Othello*, adapted and performed by the Drilling Company and directed by its founder and long-time artistic leader, Hamilton Clancy, who shared some of his thoughts with The Independent.

This is the last time the production will appear in the space that has served as its home for so many years: in 2015, the lot will be repurposed into an Andy Warhol museum, a part of the city's Essex Crossing mega-development project. That endeavor will redraw parts of the Lower East Side, lining sections of Essex and Delancey Streets near the Williamsburg Bridge with the kind of glass towers that have become synonymous with displacement and gentrification in much of the city.

Shakespeare in the Parking Lot, for its part, is searching for a new home in the neighborhood. But that won't stop the company from having a last, great hurrah in its beloved lot.

ASHLEY MARINACCIO: Why perform Shakespeare in a parking lot?

HAMILTON CLANCY: Shakespeare in the Parking Lot has a long history. This is its 20th year. The original inspiration was due to the unaffordability of a theater space. The artists thought, let's just use the parking lot across the street from the theater to produce our show. Audiences found it fun, and so it continued. One of the things that have been key about Shakespeare in the Parking Lot is that the lot is still in operation while we are doing the play. We figured no one would close the parking lot, so we have always used the empty slots. Sometimes, occasionally, there is a car that's parked where we need to do the show. When the person comes, we stop the show, move the car out and keep going. It's an event. Everyone applauds the person leaving in the show. It's one of the most beautiful, collective, community moments you can have. While you watch the play, life continues. People come through, cars and trucks pull in and out.

AM: How is seeing Shakespeare in a lot different from seeing Shakespeare in a theater?

HC: We perform in the municipal parking lot on the Lower East Side. We take one of the greatest neighborhoods in one of the greatest cities in the world and combine it with one of the greatest writers in history. In a way we've kind of inverted the Globe Theatre. Everyone who attends Shakespeare in the Parking Lot is a groundling. The way we've

kept it, there are no presales of tickets. Everyone shows up and has an equal chance of getting a good seat. We have 60 chairs for audience members. If you don't show up in time you can bring your own chair, throw a mat on the ground or sit on the astroturf we put out in front of the stage. Our audiences are regularly 120 to 200 people.

Artistically, this is the mashup we're going for: the sound of the city and urban environment clashing with great poetry. We believe if Shakespeare was here today he'd be happy to see things have evolved to where they are today.

AM: What do you hope audiences will walk away with after seeing your work?

HC: We hope that those who are not as familiar with Shakespeare will be awakened to the fact that Shakespeare is for everybody. We believe he wrote about and for everybody, and I'm 100 percent confident that anytime anyone is

in the audience of Shakespeare in the Parking Lot they are in an audience that welcomes all newcomers. And we hope that those with more familiarity with the plays will find a new way of seeing them.

AM: What has been your proudest moment as artistic director of the Drilling Company?

HC: We put a bucket out at the end of our production of *Hamlet* a few years ago. One night someone who had come to every show dropped a letter in the bucket that said the show was one of the highlights of his life at the time and had made a huge difference to him. I read it to all of our casts. It's the best "review" we've ever gotten and the reason we do this work. I am proud that we are creating work in an environment and space where people can discover it — not because they "need" to but because it's accessible.

AM: What do you see as theater's

role in creating social change?

HC: I believe we're living in a time — a zeitgeist — where we are moving from conquest to collaboration. As much as we see wars all over the place, I believe there will be fewer in the future. Everyone is trying to figure out how to collaborate and get along. The most important thing we need to figure out is what peace means. To me the theater is a laboratory for peacemaking. It makes us face realities about ourselves and other people and get to know one another better. Theater shows us that our awareness can change and change is possible. There are very few places where this can happen.

Twelfth Night runs through July 26 and Othello from July 31 to August 16. Performances are free and staged at the municipal parking lot at the corner of Ludlow and Broome Streets in Manhattan, Thursday–Saturday, 8pm.



SHAKESPEARE FOR THE PEOPLE: The Drilling Company kicked off its 20th and final summer season of performing Shakespearean classics in this Lower East Side parking lot on July 10 with a staging of *Twelfth Night*.

TIMOTHY KRAUSE

Questioning the Internet

The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age
BY ASTRA TAYLOR
METROPOLITAN BOOKS 2014

The Internet is here to sell things.

Sure, there is lofty talk of democratic access to vast troves of news and information, and one can Google-map the far corners of the world or stream music from Ethiopia. You can reconnect with high school friends via Facebook and meet the person of your dreams on dating sites. But while Silicon Valley cheerleaders insist otherwise, the Internet has evolved over the past 20 years into being primarily an engine of commerce.

In the face of new media boosters

like Richard Florida, Clay Shirky and *Wired* editor Chris Anderson who speak with unwavering confidence about a hypothetical future, cultural critic Astra Taylor offers a compelling counter-narrative in her new book, *The People's Platform*. Best known for her 2005 documentary film *Žižek!* about the Slovenian Marxist philosopher of the same name, Taylor examines how capitalism's hierarchies and inequalities are reproduced in the digital age. As she notes at the beginning of the book, "We have lived with it [the Internet] long enough to ask tough questions."

Take the media for example. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida argues that while new media technologies have disrupted career stability, they have also fueled the "information-and-idea-based economy." In practice this has led to the rise of unpaid bloggers and poorly paid reporters who

race to keep up with the 24/7 news cycle while advertisers migrate online and print journalism circles the drain. With so much content floating online, websites that can aggregate the most information and do so as cheaply as possible (think *Huffington Post*) and sell enough advertisements will have the leg up.

For Taylor, Florida's new economy is "an upbeat version of digital share-cropping. ... Under this kind of open system, everything we do gets swept back into a massive, interactive mashup in the cloud, each bit parsed in the data mine, invisible value extracted by those who own the backend."

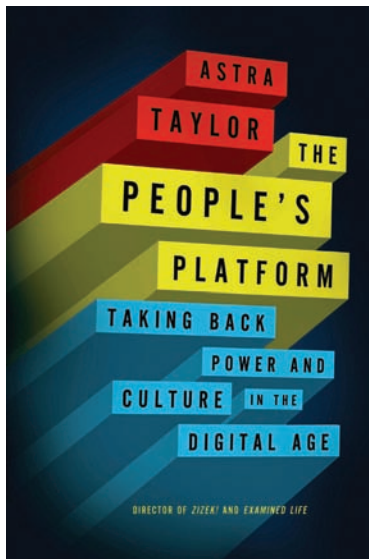
Taylor wields her pen (or is it a keyboard?) on other Internet-related topics as well, such as copyright law, free file sharing and news echo chambers (she uses the term "imaginary cosmopolitanism"). For all her criticisms of the Internet,

Taylor resists a dualism that sees technology as inherently good or bad. The Internet's failings, she insists, have more to do with social and economic forces that thwart its egalitarian potential and steer it toward being "little more than a radically discounted shopping mall."

For the Internet to truly become a "people's platform," Taylor says, people will have to wrest it back from the business interests that currently dominate it. As one example, why can't we have a civic-minded, nonprofit search engine that, unlike Google, does not relentlessly gather and mine our personal information or a vast digital library accessible to everyone?

Taylor's book bristles with concepts and ideas, but will it sell on Amazon?

— BENNETT BAUMER





The Koch Bros: Libertarians for Daddy

Sons of Wichita: How the Koch Brothers Became America's Most Powerful and Private Dynasty

BY DANIEL SCHULMAN
GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING/
HACHETTE BOOK GROUP, 2014

There is a specter haunting liberal America. It is Koch Industries and its tag team brothers Charles and David Koch. The septuagenarian pair from Wichita, Kansas, are fabulously wealthy energy barons whose massive money contributions to right-wing causes are responsible for the spread of Tea Party hegemony in the already business-friendly Republican Party.

The Kochs (pronounced like “coke”) are not the first deep-pocketed reactionaries to dabble in politics. But, as *Mother Jones* staff writer Daniel Schulman’s new book, *Sons of Wichita: How the Koch Brothers became America’s Most Powerful and Private Dynasty*, makes clear, these two MIT-trained engineers are doing something unique and more or less effective in politics. In contrast to the far right’s looniness and the left’s penchant for short-term thinking that rarely looks beyond the next protest or election cycle, the Kochs are sticking to a 35-year game plan (or long con, in their case) for promoting a strategic political agenda that is turning social Darwinism into accepted policy, where government intrusion into corporate life is the bogeyman while greed and capital’s inherent irrationality are simon-pure.

With their lavish funding of a sprawling network of conservative advocacy groups, think tanks and libertarian-leaning academics, the Kochs have nurtured every present-day reactionary movement from

voter suppression and union-busting to climate change denial. Their actions reflect a class-wide planning the United States did not encounter from older generations of plutocrats whose interests often stopped at the door of their own enterprises. It’s their militancy, patience and money that makes them provocative if not always successful — note their 2012 presidential and congressional election overreaching when they spent \$400 million of their own money and got little in return.

Inside-the-beltway chatter has it that they plan to spend upwards of \$290 million on their libertarian hobbies this year, including injecting \$100 million into congressional and state campaigns.

FAMILY VALUES

How do the boys do it? Schulman’s book is a quarry of information on what they do as well as a page-turner in its rendering of the decades-long dynastic feud between Charles, David and their two brothers over stock ownership in the family-run corporation. What isn’t clear from Schulman’s telling is why they do what they do, when other businesspeople tend toward the pragmatic if thoughtless.

There is some telling evidence, though. All four brothers were born into wealth, but an emotionally distant Fred Koch treated them more like groundskeepers than dynastic heirs. They didn’t grow up as playboys on the family estate outside Wichita, but as proverbial hewers of wood and drawers of water, and with a predisposition to think they were self-made men. Schulman’s narrative reads like a tale of over-achievers with daddy issues.

When Fred Koch died in 1967, he left his sons shares in Koch Industries, the family-owned business, largely in oil refining, with a net value in the high millions. Today it’s the second-largest private U.S. corporation (exceeded only by Cargill) with sales of \$115 billion in 2012. It’s involved not just in transporting energy but in numerous related ven-

tures. It may be facile to see politics as a necessary outcome of one’s position either as a holder of immense wealth and power or as one of the wretched of the earth, but in the Kochs’ case, policy and ideology perfectly mirror interest.

WHAT IS LIBERTARIANISM REALLY ABOUT?

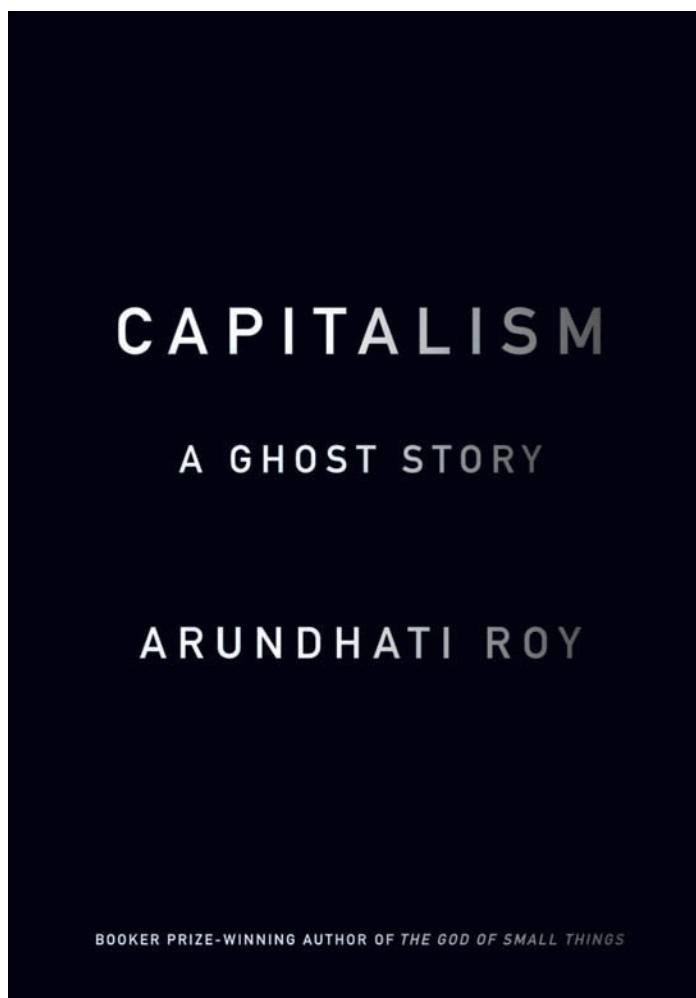
Nonetheless, Schulman takes the Kochs’ libertarian thinking at face value; it’s just a point of view like others, with a rich history dating back to the Austrian school of economics under Frederic Hayek and Ludwig Von Mises, and whose theories were said to be instrumental in reinforcing the prejudices the brothers got from their virulently anti-communist father. But there’s no explanation of what libertarianism is or its internal logic, let alone any critique. If socialism, as Hayek said, is indeed “The Road to Serfdom,” how so? And despite Schulman’s plea not to see an instrumental correspondence between *laissez-faire* ideology and the Kochs’ holdings in a giant energy corporation heavily dependent on petroleum distribution and retailing, what is “libertarian” about lavishly supporting front groups that slander environmental scientists as liars, or aligning with the religious Right?

The Kochs’ success is based not just on inherited wealth, hard work, and, last of all, brains and personality, but on gutting workers’ and consumers’ power along with a wolf-like penchant for wasting competitors. It’s also a sales job for an idea that can only benefit a handful. How many rich people can there be? And if libertarianism is more than naked self-interest bathed in smoke, aren’t its ideas worth at least a kitchen tour? Is all you need to know about this capitalist mindset that less government is more and federal regulations destroy initiative? That’s all Schulman has the Kochs offering.

— MICHAEL HIRSCH

“*Capitalism* feels like straight reportage from the front lines of a war. In every part of the world, the rich few keep getting richer on the backs of a population that continues to work harder and grow poorer for it. And Roy keeps sending these furious, intelligent bulletins to alert us to what’s going on.”

—*The Stranger*



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